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DETECTIVE STORIES

AGREE — OR DIE	*Rufus King*	5
VILLAGE TRAGEDY	*Agatha Christie*	15
NINE HOURS LATE ON THE OPENING RUN	*Herbert Brean*	35
THE DARKENED STAIR	*Shirley Barker*	54
THE BIRDWATCHER	*L. A. G. Strong*	76
DEATH AND THE RISING STAR	*Patrick Quentin*	113

CRIME STORIES

PERSONAL INTERVIEW	*Henry Slesar*	30
MAN IN A CLOSET	*Patricia Knowlton*	50
KILL OR BE KILLED	*Ogden Nash*	69
THE MAN WHO CUT OFF HIS NOSE	*Marvin Rossman*	97
AN OLD JAPANESE CUSTOM	*Walter J. Winn*	102

BLACK MASK MAGAZINE

THE LIQUIDATION OF PICKLE FAT	*John Barden*	71
BEST MYSTERIES OF THE MONTH	*Anthony Boucher*	75
INDEX TO VOLUME THIRTY		129

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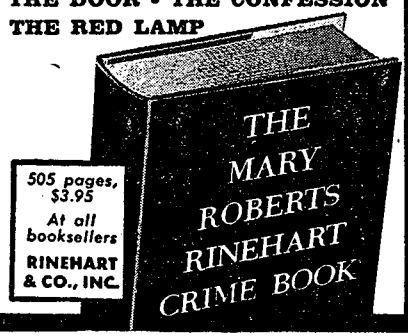

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **RUFUS KING**

TITLE: ***Agree — or Die***

TYPE: Detective-Crime Story

LOCALE: Halcyon, Florida

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *It was the fourth marriage for Mr. Herbert Waldemar, the Motel King. It was the first for Anne Borney, the Boston blueblood. It was a marriage destined to end in tragedy.*

THE WALDEMAR ESTATE LAZED IN semitropical splendor the year around. Until, that is, the night of December 10th when Herbert Waldemar, blasted by gunfire, was found in one of its beach cabanas, dead. The case—so pat, so simple on its surface—hid perhaps the most provocative question since Frank R. Stockton posed his famous one concerning the lady or the tiger.

When we first knew the Waldemar family, Herbert had been in the process of marrying his fourth wife, and Ilya (my only one) had said with her usual passionate interest in the lives of others, "I don't understand it. It's so completely off-beat."

"Why shouldn't it be, if he wants it that way?"

"Because it breaks the pattern. Men who marry a lot always stick to the same last. If I died, Fred, you would settle on my duplicate."

"Possibly, but how about the proverbial exception?"

"Not in this instance. The shift is too extreme. His other three were flaming creatures just one Bikini this side of a strip-tease, whereas Anne Borney—well!"

There was a good deal, as it usually turns out, in what Ilya said. Anne Borney was Boston Back Bay and about as flaming as a thoughtful candle in a homestead window. Not that she was negative, nor in any sense lacking in

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personality; rather, you thought of her as the well-mannered surface of a glassy and unarresting tarn that filmed sleeping depths. My own wonderment lay not so much in why Waldemar was marrying Anne Borney as in why she was marrying him.

"Money," Ilya said, putting me straight on it. "And then, he's not entirely impossible, in spite of his steam-roller technique."

This was true because Waldemar, as a whole, was acceptably sleek while escaping the oiliness of the glad-hand type of some hotel men. It was the minor facets that jarred, a feeling of reserved brutality, of a callousness that was thoroughly ruthless in its nature.

"Just the same, Ilya, a Boston Borney and a steam roller do not mix. I don't care how much cash is involved."

"She had no choice."

It is both ridiculous and a waste of time ever to question the accuracy of Ilya's information about anybody who has ruffled her curiosity. Almost without exception she will be suffocatingly right.

"What choice?"

"She couldn't take it any longer. Living on tactful handouts from her friends."

It made sense, in spite of the natural reaction of questioning why Anne Borney didn't get herself a job, because at once you saw that she couldn't get a job. Her age was against her, as were her delicately horselike patrician looks and her entire background of well-bred but, in a business sense, useless Borney womanhood. Obviously it was a toss-up between being a Society charity case or taking a handful of sleeping pills, and charity in time wears thin both for the donor and the donee.

"Had she no money at all? No solvent relatives to turn to?"

"She has one brother, ten years younger, and what money she did have she wasted on him."

"A charming bum?"

"A charming crook. Not that Peter Borney was ever indicted, but he did have connections."

"Underworld?"

"Racketeering of some nature. He has the build of a chiseled ox and turned to bodyguarding one of the F.B.I.'s most desirable, in the sense of being wanted, men. I don't know who."

"Why not?"

"Oh, really, Fred!"

"Is he still doing it? Usually such jobs pay well, so I don't see why Anne had to give him her pennies."

"His boss died, by request, two years ago and Peter has been living a model if dependent life since then."

"Where is he now?"

"He is here for the wedding, of course."

"Here" is Florida. The town of Halcyon, to be exact, on the east coast to the north of Miami where

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we bought a home after I had retired and turned the operation of my private investigation agency over to our son Frank. Frank is running it now from the main office in New York, commuting there daily from his home in Scarsdale.

As for the Herbert Waldemar estate, it is ten times the size of our own, which is nothing remarkable when you consider that our incomes are equally disproportionate, Waldemar's being a golden flood from a chain of luxury motels located in key resort spots all over the country. His Halcyon operation is on the beach and caters to wealthy jewelers from Cleveland, ardent racetrack connoisseurs, elegant divorcees, and a melange of properly heeled sun chasers.

The wedding took place in the Waldemar patio on the afternoon of November 4th. It was agreeably stereotyped in a champagne-and-caviar fashion, and the only moment of unusual interest occurred when I looked about for Ilya with the thought of breaking for home.

A casual search led through the estate's tropical garden and brought me face to face, in a secluded frangipanni-scented corner, with the bride's scamp brother Peter and a girl whom I recognized as being Waldemar's only child, Lace, the daughter of his first marriage. They were in what is referred to now, I understand, as a smootch. The term is vulgarly unjust because I caught a look in their eyes, when they came up for air, and in it lay love if ever one saw it.

I did my best to pass by in the manner of an elderly, if well preserved, blind bat but Lace disengaged herself from the muscular arms of the chiseled ox and said, in a voice that held a hint of worry and a premonition of heartache, "We'd rather you didn't mention this, Mr. Brandt."

"Of course I won't, Miss Waldemar."

"To anybody."

"Not even to Ilya."

"You're very kind."

There was an awkward second of parting, then they went off one way and I continued the hunt in another, finding Ilya by the swimming pool tossing caviar canapes to an immersed male guest who presumably was imitating a trained seal. Then we went home.

It stood to reason that any promised silence concerning the Peter-Lace entanglement could not prevent the odds from hitting a hundred to one against Ilya scenting it out, and the odds were absolutely right.

"At first I took it for another off-beat note," she said to me during breakfast several mornings later, "but it's quite understandable, really."

"Splendid."

"You needn't upstage me, Fred.

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You've had it on your mind yourself."

"I have?"

"You have. On the surface, Herbert's paternal opposition does seem contradictory. I mean, if Herbert accepted Anne Borney plus her tinged brother, why gag at Lace falling in love with him? Especially when you consider Herbert. No one would cast him as the puritanical type."

"Scarcely."

"But after a few odd bits of information," Ilya went on, "I realized that Herbert not only would oppose such a marriage but definitely had to arrange for a complete soft-pedaling of Peter and his ex-gangster milieu. I shouldn't wonder if Herbert made him a remittance man. Somewhere in Mexico or Asia."

"Anne would never stand for it."

"You'd be amazed at what Anne will have to stand for—oh, I suppose I do overdo this being omniscient stuff, but can't you see?"

"Not having your innumerable sources of information, no."

"It's because of a new motel Herbert is planning for Bar Harbor. Not like his other gaudy places. This one is to be Plaza, St. Regis, Ritz, in the most conservatively proper sense of the word. It's for Lace's sake, primarily. She's of marriageable age."

"Light dimly dawns."

"Of course it does. Of course it's why he married Anne. His other three were snap happenstances for their body content or what-have-you, but this marriage was calculatingly planned. A Boston Borney will be an impeccable magnet for an old guard clientele, and the place itself a suitable fishing bowl for Lace."

"With brother Peter presenting the only soup stain on the joint's escutcheon."

"Exactly. It will be interesting to see just what brand of spot remover Herbert selects."

"There is a sort of slow-fuse feeling about all this."

"I rather wondered when you'd get around to that." Then Ilya added absently, as she left the table to start out for her morning round of pitiable golf, "Herbert is thinking of calling the new motel The Borney Arms."

It was several weeks later—on the eve of the fatal December 10th, to pinpoint it—when Anne Borney cornered me on the verandah of the Dolphin Club during a standard Saturday night scrimmage. Possibly it was the moonlight that made her look so pale and somewhat like an unauthorized ghost out of Hamlet. She came directly to the point.

"I should like your help, Mr. Brandt. I am worried about Herbert."

"In what way, Mrs. Waldemar?"

"Naturally you are familiar with the past fight between the Hotel

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Owners Association and the organizers who were sent down to force an acceptance of the Hotel Employees Union."

"Yes."

"Also that an agreement has recently been reached and signed. As I understand it from Herbert, it is not compulsory and some of the operators are still holding out. Herbert is one of them. Herbert is possibly the most virulently antagonistic of them all."

"Are you implying threats?"

"Yes."

"Surely not directly?" The union people would never be so stupid."

"Naturally not. It is being done obliquely through a so-called 'protective' association. It has been pointed out to Herbert that unless he unionizes, or whatever the proper term is, he is laying himself open to reprisals. The association has offered to protect him from those reprisals. At a price."

"It's a familiar pattern, Mrs. Waldemar. I think your husband can discount entirely that the union is in any way connected with such a setup. You'll find it's an independent racket—some of the would-be bright boys cashing in on the local situation."

"Does it matter who they are? So far as Herbert's safety is concerned?"

"His personal safety? Surely that's going pretty far. Perhaps there'll be some sabotage in the linen, utilities put out of commission by imported goons—but not murder."

Anne Borney pressed for a moment against the verandah railing, her face moon-white toward the horizon of the metallic silvered sea.

"Why not? Why not murder, Mr. Brandt, as an example to the other owners who are holding out?"

"You keep harping on the thought almost as if your husband had received a definite threat."

"He has. He threw the association man out on his ear. This was two days ago, and yesterday morning there was that message written in the hard sand left by ebb tide."

"On your beach?"

"Yes. The message read: *Waldemar, agree—or die.* No more. Just the four words. Herbert said it struck him as laughable. He stamped them out."

The message was, of course, not only rankly melodramatic but downright corny. It reeked of the amateur and I said so, adding that the very location of the message was absurd. A billboard could scarcely have been more public or spectacular.

"Not really, Mr. Brandt. Our beach boy doesn't go on duty until eight, and Herbert always takes a morning plunge at seven. The beach is quite private."

"Did Mr. Waldemar broadcast the discovery?"

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"Only to us at breakfast. He made some weighty jokes about it."

"Lace and Peter were with you?"

"Yes. It was a send-off meal in a way. Peter caught a plane shortly afterward for the Bahamas. Herbert is sending him on a tour of the islands and, later, to South America to look up potential motel sites. Herbert's motto would seem to be Expansion."

(How right, as per schedule, Ilya had been! Remittance stuff in acceptable camouflage.)

"You said I might help you, Mrs. Waldemar. How?"

"I should like to arrange through your agency for a guard. I understand your son now runs it, but perhaps you would take it up with him for me?"

"I should be glad to, but would Mr. Waldemar agree?"

"Frankly, no. I should like him to be protected without his knowledge. Can it be done?"

"It would be difficult, but possible. I'll call Frank in the morning."

But Waldemar was dead by morning.

There were four gunshot wounds in various parts of Waldemar's anatomy, and the shots had been fired from a sufficient distance so that the bullets had remained in the body. Upon being extracted, they proved to have come from four guns of different calibers—a .38 S.&W. revolver, a .32 Colt automatic pistol, a .30 Luger, and a .455 caliber bullet tentatively identified as having been shot from a British Webley-Fosbery semi-automatic. Time of death: roughly between 2 and 3 A.M.

These technical details were given us by Chet Duggan, who is the chief criminal investigator for our sheriff's department. We are good friends, and he occasionally drops in on Ilya and me for a bull session about criminals who (either because of his personal or my agency's more collective smartnesses) had hit the dust.

Duggan's fondness for clichés amounts almost to a vice, and he announced flatly, "This case is open and shut."

'So it would seem," I agreed, while Ilya remained commentless and continued with a lilac cashmere stole she was knitting for herself for Christmas.

Succinctly, the official version was that four hoods, imported by the "protective" association for general sabotage and terrorization, had done the job. They were already in custody and being held for the grand jury on suspicion of Murder One. As each relied on the other three for an alibi, said alibis canceled each other out, amounting to zero. The four murder guns undoubtedly were silted at the bottom of the Atlantic Ocean.

A note signed *Floss* had been

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found among other personal papers on the desk in Waldemar's room when it had been gone through by the boys. The note had aranged for a 2 A.M. rendezvous at the scene of the crime, the beach cabana, and Floss had been identified as Miss Bubble Girl of 1956 in one of Miami's more lurid traps. It was current gossip among her professional set that she was hopeful of becoming, at some future convenient date, the Mrs. Waldemar No. 5.

Floss tigerishly denied having written the note, and a check of her handwriting proved her point. It was officially accepted, however, that she knew of it, inasmuch as she was unplatonically involved with one of the four apprehended hoods and a check of his handwriting proved the note to have been written by him. This he admitted, and further admitted (after a session of judiciously expert treatment) that he and his three confrères had gone to the cabana to beat Waldemar up, but the four of them screamed their head off that Waldemar was already dead when they got there. Both the police and the sheriff's department thought this very amusing.

"The whole thing is in the bag," Duggan said contentedly. "They used the note to put him on the spot. Furthermore, even if the trial should slip up here, which it won't, the bums are wanted for the death of the little Bixby boy in St. Louis and for the shotgun blasting of the girl bank teller in Denver. Come hell or high water, those buzzards are due to fry. You can take your pick of for what."

Matters turned out quite along the line that Duggan had forecast. The grand jury returned a true bill and the four were indicted for murder in the first degree. (Floss was exonerated as having been an unknowing dupe in regard to the murderous purpose of the assignation note, and returned to her bubbles.) Two months later, in March, the gunmen were brought to trial, found guilty, and sentenced to the chair during the week of June 10 to 17. Appeals were denied, and on June 13 they were electrocuted.

On what might be called the social side of this period, affairs also progressed. Lace inherited her father's large fortune, with Anne getting her widow's share—a fortune in itself—while Peter returned promptly from his motel site-viewing tour and married Lace in a very quiet and unpublicized wedding.

It was pleasant to consider how just Fate was with its comeuppances. There seemed little question but that Waldemar had been a viciously ruthless and selfish man in his private life. Even though I knew nothing personally about them, with the exception of Anne, his three former wives had been flesh and blood, with all the feel-

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ings that women have and all their capacities for being hurt. Especially this must have been true about Lace's mother, for surely Lace was a reflection of her and not of Waldemar. Yet he had used these women more as bought-and-paid-for mistresses than as wives and, getting tired of them, had callously, brutally (according to the records) kicked them out. Now he was dead.

And the four hoods who had killed him were dead, too. If any men deserved execution, they did. There was no question of their guilt in the Bixby boy case in St. Louis, that Duggan had referred to, nor in the wanton slaying of the girl bank teller in Denver. Nor did there seem any reasonable question regarding their shooting of Waldemar even though the state's case had been purely circumstantial and all four had maintained their innocence to the end. As Duggan had said, "no matter for what" they had got what they deserved.

Yes, everybody was satisfied.

Except Ilya.

"Tell me, Fred," she said during supper on the evening after the execution, "how do you feel about Weissman's theory on genes and on heredity in general?"

"I feel nothing, Ilya. I don't even know what his theory is."

"It's about passing character traits on from parent to child during successive generations—traits like horse stealing or homicidal mania. Weissman was a Nineteenth Century contemporary of Mendel and Darwin, and his contention is that inheritance consists in determinants which cause character traits to appear—rather, to reappear—*under the right conditions*. If the conditions aren't right they still keep passing on from parent to child, but they stay dormant. Until."

"I take it you mean that if Captain Kidd or Jack the Ripper were my ancestors, their blood-letting proclivities might have lain dormant in my father, grandfather, and etcetera, only to come suddenly to life again in me if the conditions were right?"

"Precisely."

"Well, so what? Why bring the subject up?"

"Because it explains the murder of Herbert. Those four men never killed him, of course."

I'll admit I felt shaken. In the several homicidal cases our agency had handled (our work deals largely with defalcations in banks and corporations), Ilya's perception and judgment had been infallible—and they had not been based upon that kicked-around commodity known as woman's intuition. If she were right in the Waldemar instance, then who killed him? Well, Peter as a prime suspect stuck out like a sore thumb.

"I suppose, Ilya, in your sibylline

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fashion you are getting around to the revelation that Peter collected four hoods from his gangster-association days and arranged the deal while he alibied himself in the Bahamas?"

"I am not. Peter had nothing to do with it."

"Well, Lace certainly didn't, nor Anne."

"Not Lace."

"Anne?"

"Who else?"

Like a fool, I laughed. Heartily. A mental picture of the gently bred and nurtured Anne Borney hiring four gunmen, even if she would remotely know how to get in touch with four paid killers, was too much. I said so.

"What is more," I added, "why should she? She'd made a bargain with Waldemar when she married him, and she's the type of woman who would keep it."

"Granted. Provided the other person to the bargain kept his side of it. You know perfectly well that as soon as Herbert got all he wanted from her, Anne would have been out on her ear again. With that Floss or some other bubble-dancing expert sliding into her place."

"That is still no reason for murder—definitely not for a woman of Anne's background and character."

Ilya sighed patiently.

"I've been in touch during the past few months with Marion Dorchester in Boston," she said—I remembered Miss Dorchester vaguely as being one of Ilya's elderly spinster friends. "Marion is an officer in one of the genealogical societies of Massachusetts and I asked her to trace the Borney line back."

"Why?"

"Because the same doubts puzzled me that are now puzzling you. Marion didn't finish her research—that sort of digging takes ages—until this morning, and she called me up. The electrocution was an accomplished fact by then, of course. It's pretty amazing what Marion unearthed, Fred."

"A celebrated murder in the family tree?"

"No. Marion traced the line back into the Fifteenth Century when the Borney name was originally spelled Bonny. Back to the days of pirates. Two of whom were women. You'll find them listed in the Encyclopedia Britannica. A Mary Read was one of them. The other was named Anne Bonny."

"Anne Borney—"

"Think of her as Anne Bonny. Think of Herbert Waldemar as the bullion-laden prize frigate that would get her and Peter out of all their difficulties. *Think*, Fred."

"I am thinking. I'm thinking of the mechanics of Waldemar's murder. Regardless of her inherited piratical potentialities, I'm thinking of the difficulty—the impossibility

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really—of a woman like Anne Borney getting in touch with and hiring four professional killers."

"She didn't. She accomplished what amounts to the perfect crime. The case is closed and no proofs exist to open it up again. Anne easily could have found that note from Floss making the assignation in the cabana. The hoods undoubtedly kept the rendezvous and did find Herbert dead. Anne simply managed to get there first. She had plenty of time between finding the note and two o'clock in the morning to make arrangements."

"Are you crazy, Ilya? Time to shop around and pick up four killers—as if she were shopping for a hat?"

"I am not crazy, Fred, and she didn't pick up four killers. I told you this was the perfect crime. It was accepted by the police exactly for what it was intended—a mobster killing. Anne handled it entirely by herself. Guns can be bought a dime a dozen, and no questions asked, here in Florida. Anne simply bought four pistols of different calibers and put one shot from each into Herbert."

"Not Anne—"

"Anne Borney, no. But the no longer dormant determinants and piratical traits of Anne Bonny, yes. Blood, Fred, will tell."

The question raised was staggering.

Had blood told?

Or had it not?

What do you think? The lady—or the pirate?

"O"

ONCE AGAIN . . .

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **AGATHA CHRISTIE**

TITLE: ***Village Tragedy***

TYPE: Detective Story

DETECTIVE: Miss Marple

LOCALE: St. Mary Mead, England

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *For all her provincialism, Miss Marple is a remarkably worldly person—in the sense that she has a deep specialized knowledge of human beings and human behavior . . .*

SIR HENRY CLITHERING, EX-COMMISSIONER of Scotland Yard, was staying with his friends the Bantrys at their place near the little village of St. Mary Mead.

On Saturday morning, coming down to breakfast at the pleasant guestly hour of ten fifteen, he almost collided with his hostess, Mrs. Bantry, in the doorway of the breakfast room. She was rushing from the room, evidently in a condition of some excitement and distress.

Colonel Bantry was sitting at the table, his face rather redder than usual.

"'Morning, Clithering," he said. "Nice day. Help yourself."

Sir Henry obeyed. As he took his seat, a plate of kidneys and bacon in front of him, his host went on, "Dolly's a bit upset this morning."

"Yes—er—I rather thought so," said Sir Henry, mildly.

He wondered a little. His hostess was of a placid disposition, little given to moods or excitements. As far as Sir Henry knew, she felt keenly on one subject only—gardening.

"Yes," said Colonel Bantry. "Bit of news we got this morning upset her. Girl in the village—Emmott's daughter—Emmott who keeps The Blue Boar."

"Oh, yes, of course."

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"Ye-es," said Colonel Bantry ruminatively. "Pretty girl. Got herself into trouble. Usual story. I've been arguing with Dolly about that. Foolish of me. Women never see sense. Dolly was all up in arms for the girl—you know what women are—men are brutes—all the rest of it, etcetera. But it's not so simple as all that—not these days. Girls know what they're about. Fellow who seduces a girl's not necessarily a villain. Fifty-fifty as often as not. I rather liked young Sandford myself. A young ass rather than a Don Juan, I should have said."

"It is this man Sandford who got the girl into trouble?"

"So it seems. Of course I don't know anything personally," said the colonel cautiously. "It's all gossip and chat. You know what this place is! As I say, I *know* nothing. And I'm not like Dolly—leaping to conclusions, flinging accusations all over the place. Damn it all, one ought to be careful what one says. You know—inquest and all that."

"Inquest?"

Colonel Bantry stared.

"Yes. Didn't I tell you? Girl drowned herself. That's what all the pother's about."

"A nasty business," said Sir Henry.

"Of course it is. Don't like to think of it myself. Poor pretty little devil. Her father's a hard man by all accounts. I suppose she just felt she couldn't face the music." He paused. "That's what's upset Dolly so."

"Where did she drown herself?"

"In the river. Just below the mill it runs pretty fast. There's a footpath and a bridge across. They think she threw herself off that. Well, well, it doesn't bear thinking about."

And with a portentous rustle Colonel Bantry opened his newspaper and proceeded to distract his mind from painful matters by an absorption in the newest iniquities of the government.

Sir Henry was only mildly interested by the village tragedy. After breakfast he established himself in a comfortable chair on the lawn, tilted his hat over his eyes, and contemplated life from a peaceful angle.

It was about half-past eleven when a neat parlormaid ran across the lawn.

"If you please, sir, Miss Marple has called, and would like to see you."

"Miss Marple?"

Sir Henry sat up and straightened his hat. He remembered Miss Marple very well—her gentle, quiet ways, her amazing penetration. He remembered a dozen unsolved and hypothetical cases—and how in each case this typical "old maid of the village" had leaped unerringly to the right solution of the mystery. Sir Henry had a deep respect for Miss Marple. He wondered what had brought her to see him.

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Miss Marple was sitting in the drawing room—very upright as always, a gaily colored marketing basket of foreign extraction beside her. Her cheeks were pink and she seemed flushed.

"Sir Henry—I am so glad. So fortunate to find you. I just happened to hear that you were staying down here . . . I do hope you will forgive me . . ."

"This is a great pleasure," said Sir Henry, taking her hand. "I'm afraid Mrs. Bantry's out."

"Yes," said Miss Marple. "I saw her talking to Footit, the butcher, as I passed. Henry Footit was run over yesterday—that was his dog. One of those smooth-haired fox terriers, rather stout and quarrelsome, that butchers always have to have."

"Yes," said Sir Henry helpfully.

"I was glad to get here when she wasn't at home," continued Miss Marple, "because it was you I wanted to see. About this sad affair."

"Henry Footit?" asked Sir Henry, slightly bewildered.

Miss Marple threw him a reproachful glance.

"No, no. Rose Emmott, of course. You've heard?"

Sir Henry nodded. "Bantry was telling me. Very sad."

He was a little puzzled. He could not conceive why Miss Marple should want to see him about Rose Emmott.

Miss Marple sat down again. Sir Henry also sat. When the old lady spoke her manner had changed. It was grave, and had a certain dignity.

"You may remember, Sir Henry, that on one or two occasions we played what was really a pleasant kind of game. Propounding mysteries and giving solutions. You were kind enough to say that I—that I did not do too badly."

"You beat us all," said Sir Henry warmly. "You displayed an absolute genius for getting to the truth. And you always referred, I remember, to some village parallel which had supplied you with the vital clue."

He smiled as he spoke, but Miss Marple did not smile. She remained very grave.

"What you said has emboldened me to come to you now. I feel that if I say something to you—at least you will not laugh at me."

He realized suddenly that she was in deadly earnest.

"Certainly, I will not laugh," he said gently.

"Sir Henry—this girl—Rose Emmott. She did not drown herself—*she was murdered* . . . And I know who murdered her."

Sir Henry was silent with sheer astonishment for three seconds. Miss Marple's voice had been perfectly quiet and unexcited. She might have been making the most ordinary statement in the world for all the emotion she showed.

"That is a very serious statement

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to make, Miss Marple," said Sir Henry when he had recovered his breath.

She nodded her head several times.

"I know, I know—that is why I have come to you."

"But, my dear lady, I am not the person to come to. I am merely a private individual nowadays. If you have knowledge of the kind you claim, you must go to the police."

"I don't think I can do that," said Miss Marple.

"But why not?"

"Because, you see, I haven't got any—what you call *knowledge*."

"You mean it's only a guess on your part?"

"You can call it that, if you like, but it's not really that at all. I *know*. I'm in a position to know; but if I gave my reasons for knowing to Inspector Drewitt—well, he'd simply laugh. And really, I don't know that I'd blame him. It's very difficult to understand what you might call specialized knowledge."

"Such as?" suggested Sir Henry.

Miss Marple smiled a little.

"If I were to tell you that I know because a man called Peasegood left turnips instead of carrots when he came round with a cart and sold vegetables to my niece several years ago—"

She stopped eloquently.

"A very appropriate name for his trade," murmured Sir Henry.

"You mean that you are simply judging from the facts in a parallel case."

"I know human nature," said Miss Marple. "It's impossible not to know human nature living in a village all these years. The question is, do you believe me, or don't you?"

She looked straight at him. The pink flush had heightened on her cheeks. Her eyes met his steadily, without wavering.

Sir Henry was a man with a vast experience of life. He made his decisions quickly without beating about the bush. Unlikely and fantastic as Miss Marple's statement might seem, he was instantly aware that he accepted it.

"I *do* believe you, Miss Marple. But I do not see what you want me to do in the matter, or why you have come to me."

"I have thought and thought about it," said Miss Marple. "As I said, it would be useless going to the police without any facts. I have no facts. What I would ask you to do is to interest yourself in the matter—Inspector Drewitt would be most flattered, I am sure. And, of course, if the matter went further, Colonel Melchett, the Chief Constable, I am sure, would be wax in your hands."

She looked at him most appealingly.

"And what data are you going to give me to work on?"

"I thought," said Miss Marple,

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"of writing a name—*the* name—on a piece of paper and giving it to you. Then if, on investigation, you decide that the—the *person*—is not involved in any way—well, I shall have been quite wrong."

She paused, then added with a slight shiver, "It would be so dreadful—so very dreadful—if an innocent person were to be hanged."

"What on earth—" cried Sir Henry, startled.

She turned a distressed face upon him.

"I may be wrong about that—though I don't think so. Inspector Drewitt, you see, is really an intelligent man. But a mediocre amount of intelligence is sometimes most dangerous. It does not take one far enough."

Sir Henry looked at her curiously.

Fumbling a little, Miss Marple opened a small reticule, took out a little notebook, tore out a leaf, carefully wrote a name on it and folding it in two, handed it to Sir Henry.

He opened it and read the name. It conveyed nothing to him, but his eyebrows lifted a little. He looked across at Miss Marple and tucked the piece of paper in his pocket.

"Well, well," he said. "Rather an extraordinary business, this. I've never done anything like it before. But I'm going to back my judgment—of *you*, Miss Marple. . . ."

Sir Henry was sitting in a room with Colonel Melchett, the Chief Constable of the county, and Inspector Drewitt.

The Chief Constable was a little man of aggressively military demeanor. The Inspector was big and broad and eminently sensible.

"I really do feel I'm butting in," said Sir Henry with a pleasant smile. "I can't really tell you why I'm doing it." (Strict truth, this!)

"My dear fellow, we're charmed. It's a great compliment."

"Honored, Sir Henry," said the Inspector.

The Chief Constable was thinking: "Bored to death, poor fellow, at the Bantrys. The old man abusing the government and the old woman babbling on about bulbs."

The Inspector was thinking: "Pity we're not up against a real teaser. One of the best brains in England, I've heard it said. Pity it's all such plain sailing."

Aloud, the Chief Constable said: "I'm afraid it's all very sordid and straightforward. First idea was that the girl had pitched herself in. She was in the family way, you understand. However, our doctor Haydock, is a careful fellow. He noticed the bruises on each arm—upper arm. Caused *before* death. Just where a fellow would have taken her by the arms and flung her in."

"Would that require much strength?"

"I think not. There would be no

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struggle—the girl would be taken unawares. It's a footbridge of slippery wood. Easiest thing in the world to pitch her over—there's no handrail that side."

"You know for a fact that the tragedy occurred there?"

"Yes. We've got a boy—Jimmy Brown—aged twelve. He was in the woods on the other side. He heard a kind of scream from the bridge and a splash. It was dusk, you know—difficult to see anything. Presently he saw something white floating down in the water and he ran and got help. They got her out, but it was too late to revive her."

Sir Henry nodded. "The boy saw no one on the bridge?"

"No. But, as I tell you, it was dusk, and there's mist always hanging about there. I'm going to question him as to whether he saw anyone about just afterwards or just before. You see he naturally assumed that the girl had thrown herself over. Everybody did to start with."

"Still, we've got the note," said Inspector Drewitt. He turned to Sir Henry. "Note in the dead girl's pocket, sir. Written with a kind of artist's pencil it was, and all of a sop though the paper was, we managed to read it."

"And what did it say?"

"It was from young Sandford. 'All right,' that's how it ran. 'I'll meet you at the bridge at eight thirty.—R.S.' Well, it was as near as might be to eight thirty—a few minutes after—when Jimmy Brown heard the cry and the splash."

"I don't know whether you've met Sandford at all?" went on Colonel Melchett. "He's been down here about a month. One of those modern-day young architects who build peculiar houses. He's doing a house for Allington. God knows what it's going to be like—full of newfangled stuff, I suppose. Glass dinner table and surgical chairs made of steel and webbing. Well, that's neither here nor there, but it shows the kind of chap Sandford is. You know—no morals."

"Seduction," said Sir Henry mildly, "is quite an old-established crime though it does not, of course, date back so far as murder."

Colonel Melchett stared.

"Oh! Yes," he said. "Quite. Quite."

"Well, Sir Henry," said Drewitt, "there it is—an ugly business, but plain. This young Sandford gets the girl into trouble. Then he's all for clearing off back to London. He's got a girl there—nice young lady—he's engaged to be married to her. Well, naturally this business, if she gets to hear of it, may cook his goose good and proper. He meets Rose at the bridge—it's a misty evening, no one about—he catches her by the shoulders and pitches her in. A proper young swine—and deserves what's coming to him. That's my opinion."

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Sir Henry was silent for a minute or two. He perceived a strong undercurrent of local prejudice. A newfangled architect was not likely to be popular in the conservative old village of St. Mary Mead.

"There is no doubt, I suppose, that this man, Sandford, was actually the father of the coming child?" he asked.

"He's the father all right," said Drewitt. "Rose Emmott let out as much to her father. She thought he'd marry her. Marry her! Not he!"

"Dear me," thought Sir Henry, "I seem to be back in mid-Victorian melodrama. Unsuspecting girl, the villain from London, the stern father, the betrayal—we only need the faithful village lover. Yes, I think it's time I asked about him."

And aloud he said: "Hadn't the girl a young man of her own down here?"

"You mean Joe Ellis?" said the inspector. "Good fellow Joe. Carpentering's his trade. Ah! If she'd stuck to Joe—"

Colonel Melchett nodded approval.

"Stick to your own class," he snapped.

"How did Joe Ellis take this affair?" asked Sir Henry.

"Nobody knew how he was taking it," said the inspector. "He's a quiet fellow, is Joe. Close. Anything Rose did was right in his eyes. She had him on a string all right. Just hoped she'd come back to him some day—that was his attitude, I reckon."

"I'd like to see him," said Sir Henry.

"Oh! We're going to look him up," said Colonel Melchett. "We're not neglecting any line. I thought myself we'd see Emmott first, then Sanford, and then we can go on and see Ellis. That suit you, Clithering?"

Sir Henry said it would suit him admirably.

They found Tom Emmott at The Blue Boar. He was a big burly man of middle age with a shifty eye and a truculent jaw.

"Glad to see you, gentlemen—good morning, Colonel. Come in here and we can be private. Can I offer you anything, gentlemen? No? It's as you please. You've come about this business of my poor girl. Ah! She was a good girl, Rose was. Always was a good girl—till this bloody swine—beg pardon, but that's what he is—till he came along. Promised her marriage, he did. But I'll have the law of him. Drove her to it, he did. Murdering swine. Bringing disgrace on all of us. My poor girl."

"Your daughter distinctly told you that Mr. Sandford was responsible for her condition?" asked Melchett crisply.

"She did. In this very room."

"And what did you say to her?" asked Sir Henry.

"Say to her?" The man seemed momentarily taken aback.

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"Yes. You didn't, for example, threaten to turn her out of the house."

"I was a bit upset—that's only natural. I'm sure you'll agree that's only natural. But, of course, I didn't turn her out of the house. I wouldn't do such a thing." He assumed virtuous indignation. "No. What's the law for—that's what I say. What's the law for? He'd got to do the right thing by her. And if he didn't, by God, he'd got to pay."

He brought down his fist on the table.

"What time did you last see your daughter?" asked Melchett.

"Yesterday—tea time."

"What was her manner then?"

"Well—much as usual. I didn't notice anything. If I'd known—"

"But you didn't know," said the inspector drily.

They took their leave.

"Emmott hardly creates a favorable impression," said Sir Henry thoughtfully.

"Bit of a blackguard," said Melchett. "He'd have bled Sandford if he'd had the chance."

Their next call was on the architect. Rex Sandford was very unlike the picture Sir Henry had unconsciously formed of him. He was a tall young man, very fair and very thin. His eyes were blue and dreamy, his hair was untidy and rather long. His speech was a little too ladylike.

Colonel Melchett introduced himself and his companions. Then passing straight to the object of his visit, he invited the architect to make a statement as to his movements on the previous evening.

"You understand," he said warningly. "I have no power to compel a statement from you and any statement you make may be used in evidence against you. I want the position to be quite clear to you."

"I—I don't understand," said Sandford.

"You understand that the girl Rose Emmott was drowned last night?"

"I know. Oh, it's too, too distressing. Really, I haven't slept a wink. I've been incapable of any work today. I feel responsible—terribly responsible."

He ran his hands through his hair, making it untidier still.

"I never meant any harm," he said piteously. "I never dreamt—she'd take it that way."

He sat down at a table and buried his face in his hands.

"Do I understand you to say, Mr. Sandford, that you refuse to make a statement as to where you were last night at eight thirty?"

"No, no—certainly not. I was out. I went for a walk."

"You went to meet Miss Emmott?"

"No. I went by myself. Through the woods. A long way."

"Then how do you account for this note, sir, which was found in the dead girl's pocket?"

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And Inspector Drewitt read it aloud unemotionally.

"Now, sir," he finished. "Do you deny that you wrote that?"

"No-no. You're right. I did write it. Rose asked me to meet her. She insisted. I didn't know what to do. So I wrote that note."

"Ah, that's better," said the inspector.

"But I didn't go!" Sandford's voice rose high and excited. "I didn't go! I felt it would be much better not to. I was returning to town tomorrow. I felt it would be better not—not to meet her. I intended to write from London and —and make—some arrangement."

"You are aware, sir, that this girl was going to have a child, and that she had named you as its father?"

Sandford groaned.

"Was that statement true, sir?"

Sandford buried his face deeper.

"I suppose so," he said in a muffled voice.

"Ah!" Inspector Drewitt could not disguise his satisfaction. "Now about this 'walk' of yours. Is there anyone who saw you last night?"

"I don't know. I don't think so. As far as I can remember, I didn't meet anybody."

"That's a pity."

"What do you mean?" Sandford stared wildly at him. "What does it matter whether I was out for a walk or not? What difference does that make to Rose drowning herself?"

"Ah!" said the Inspector. "But you see, *she didn't*. She was thrown in deliberately, Mr. Sandford."

"She was—" It took him a minute or two to take in all the horror of it. "My God! Then—"

He dropped into a chair.

Colonel Melchett made a move to depart.

"You understand, Sandford," he said. "You are on no account to leave this house."

The three men left together. The Inspector and the Chief Constable exchanged glances.

"That's enough, I think, sir," said the Inspector.

"Yes. Get a warrant made out and arrest him."

"Excuse me," said Sir Henry, "I've forgotten my gloves."

He re-entered the house rapidly. Sandford was sitting just as they had left him, staring dazedly in front of him.

"I have come back," said Sir Henry, "to tell you that I, personally, am anxious to do all I can to assist you. The motive of my interest in you I am not at liberty to reveal. But I am going to ask you, if you will, to tell me as briefly as possible exactly what passed between you and this girl Rose."

"She was very pretty," said Sandford. "Very pretty and very alluring. And—and she made a dead set for me. Before God, that's true. She wouldn't let me alone. And it

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was lonely down here, and nobody liked me much, and—and, as I say she was amazingly pretty and she seemed to know her way about and all that—" His voice died away. He looked up. "And then this happened. She wanted me to marry her. I didn't know what to do. I'm engaged to a girl in London. If she ever gets to hear of this—and she will, of course—well, it's all up. She won't understand. How could she? And I'm a rotter, of course. As I say, I didn't know what to do. I avoided seeing Rose again. I thought I'd get back to town—see my lawyer—make arrangements about money and so forth, for her. God, what a fool I've been! And it's all so clear—the case against me. But they've made a mistake. She *must* have done it herself."

"Did she ever threaten to take her life?"

Sandford shook his head. "Never. I shouldn't have said she was that sort."

"What about a man called Joe Ellis?"

"The carpenter fellow? Good old village stock. Dull fellow—but crazy about Rose."

"He might have been jealous?" suggested Sir Henry.

"I suppose he was a bit—but he's the bovine kind. He'd suffer in silence."

"Well," said Sir Henry. "I must be going.

He rejoined the others.

"You know, Melchett," he said, "I feel we ought to have a look at this other fellow—Ellis—before we do anything drastic. Pity if you made an arrest that turned out to be a mistake. After all, jealousy is a pretty good motive for murder—and a pretty common one, too."

"That's true enough," said the Inspector. "But Joe Ellis isn't that kind. He wouldn't hurt a fly. Why, nobody's ever seen him out of temper. Still, I agree we'd better just ask him where he was last night. He'll be at home now. He lodges with Mrs. Bartlett—very decent soul—a widow, she takes in a bit of washing."

The little cottage to which they went was spotlessly clean and neat. A big stout woman of middle age opened the door to them. She had a pleasant face and blue eyes.

"Good morning, Mrs. Bartlett," said the Inspector. "Is Joe Ellis here?"

"Came back not ten minutes ago," said Mrs. Bartlett. "Step inside, will you, please, sirs."

Wiping her hands on her apron she led them into a tiny front parlor with stuffed birds, china dogs, a sofa, and several useless pieces of furniture.

She hurriedly arranged seats for them, picked up a whatnot bodily to make further room, and went out calling: "Joe, there's three gentlemen to see you."

A voice from the back kitchen

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replied: "I'll be there when I've cleaned myself."

Mrs. Bartlett poked her head into the room, and smiled.

"Come in, Mrs. Bartlett," said Colonel Melchett. "Sit down."

"Oh, no, sir, I couldn't think of it."

"You find Joe Ellis a good lodger?" inquired Melchett in a seemingly careless tone.

"Couldn't have a better, sir. A real steady young man. Never touches a drop of drink. Takes a pride in his work. And always kind and helpful about the house. He put up those shelves for me, and he's fixed a new table in the kitchen. And any little thing that wants doing in the house—why, Joe does it as a matter of course, and won't hardly take thanks for it. Ah, there aren't many young fellows like Joe, sir."

"Some girl will be lucky some day," said Melchett carelessly. "He was rather sweet on that poor girl, Rose Emmott, wasn't he?"

Mrs. Bartlett sighed. "It made me tired, it did. Him worshipping the ground she trod on and her not caring a snap of the fingers for him."

"Where does Joe spend his evenings, Mrs. Bartlett?"

"Here, sir, usually. He does some odd piece work in the evenings, sometimes, and he's trying to learn bookeeping by correspondence."

"Ah, really. Was he in yesterday evening?"

"Yes, sir."

"You're sure, Mrs. Bartlett?" asked Sir Henry sharply.

She turned to him. "Quite sure, sir."

"He didn't go out, for instance, somewhere about eight to eight thirty?"

"Oh, no." Mrs. Bartlett laughed. "He was fixing the kitchen table for me nearly all evening, and I was helping him."

Sir Henry looked at her smiling assured face and felt his first pang of doubt.

A moment later Ellis himself entered the room.

He was a tall, broad-shouldered young man, very good-looking in a rustic way. He had shy blue eyes and a good-tempered smile. Altogether an amiable young giant.

Melchett opened the conversation. Mrs. Bartlett withdrew to the kitchen.

"We are investigating the death of Rose Emmott. You knew her, Ellis."

"Yes." He hesitated, then muttered, "Hoped to marry her one day. Poor lass."

"You have heard what her condition was?"

"Yes." A spark of anger showed in his eye. "Let her down, he did. But 'twere for the best. She wouldn't have been happy married to him. I reckoned she'd come to me when this happened. I'd have looked after her."

"In spite of—"

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"'Tweren't her fault. He led her astray with fine promises and all. Oh, she told me about it. She'd no call to drown herself. He weren't worth it."

"Where were you, Ellis, last night at eight thirty?"

Was it Sir Henry's fancy, or was there really a shade of constraint in the ready—almost too ready—reply.

"I was here. Fixing up a table in the kitchen for Mrs. B. You ask her. She'll tell you."

"He was too quick with that," thought Sir Henry. "He's a slow-thinking man. That popped out so pat that I suspect he'd got it ready beforehand."

Then he told himself that it was imagination. He was imagining things—yes, even imagining an apprehensive glint in those blue eyes.

A few more questions and answers and they left. Sir Henry made an excuse to go to the kitchen. Mrs. Bartlett was busy at the stove. She looked up with a pleasant smile. A new table was standing against the wall. It was not quite finished. Some tools lay about and some pieces of wood.

"That's what Ellis was working on last night?" said Sir Henry.

"Yes, sir. It's a nice bit of work, isn't it? He's a very good carpenter, Joe is."

No apprehensive gleam in her eye—no embarrassment.

But Ellis—had he imagined it? No, there *had* been something.

"I must tackle him," thought Sir Henry.

Turning to leave the kitchen, he collided with a perambulator.

"Not woken the baby up, I hope," he said.

Mrs. Bartlett's laugh rang out.

"Oh, no, sir. I've no children—more's the pity. That's what I take the laundry in, sir."

"Oh, I see—"

He paused, then said on an impulse. "Mrs. Bartlett, you knew Rose Emmott. Tell me what you really thought of her."

She looked at him curiously.

"Well, sir, I thought she was flighty. But she's dead—and I don't like to speak ill of the dead."

"But I have a reason—a very good reason for asking."

He spoke persuasively.

She seemed to consider, studying him attentively. Finally she made up her mind.

"She was a bad lot, sir," she said quietly. "I wouldn't say so before Joe. She took *him* in good and proper. That kind can—more's the pity. You know how it is, sir."

Yes, Sir Henry knew. The Joe Ellises of the world were peculiarly vulnerable. They trusted blindly. But for that very cause the shock of discovery might be greater.

He left the cottage baffled and perplexed. He was up against a blank wall. Joe Ellis had been working indoors all yesterday evening. Mrs. Bartlett had actually

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been there watching him. Could one possibly get round that? There was nothing to set against it—except possibly that suspicious readiness in replying on Joe Ellis's part.

"Well," said Melchett. "That seems to make the matter quite clear, eh?"

"It does, sir," agreed the Inspector. "Sandford's our man. Not a leg to stand upon. The thing's as plain as daylight. It's my opinion the girl and her father were out to —well—practically blackmail him. He's no money to speak of—he didn't want the matter to get to his young lady's ears. He was desperate and he acted accordingly. What do you say, sir?"

"It seems so," admitted Sir Henry. "And yet—I can hardly picture Sandford committing any violent action."

But he knew as he spoke that that objection was hardly valid. The meekest animal, when cornered, is capable of amazing actions.

"I should like to see the boy, though," he said suddenly. "The one who heard the cry."

Jimmy Brown proved to be an intelligent lad, rather small for his age, with a sharp, rather cunning face. He was eager to be questioned and was rather disappointed when interrupted in his dramatic tale.

"You were on the other side of the bridge, I understand," said Sir Henry. "Across the river from the village. Did you see anyone on that side as you came over the bridge?"

"There was someone walking up in the woods. Mr. Sandford, I think it was, the architect gentleman who's building the queer house."

The men exchanged glances.

"That was about ten minutes or so *before* you heard the cry?"

The boy nodded.

"Did you see anyone else—on the village side of the river?"

"A man came along the path that side. Going slow and whistling he was. Might have been Joe Ellis."

"You couldn't possibly have seen who it was," said the Inspector sharply. "What with the mist and its being dusk."

"It's on account of the whistle," said the boy. "Joe Ellis always whistles the same tune—*I Want to Be Happy*—it's the only tune he knows."

He spoke with the scorn of the modernist for the old-fashioned.

"Anyone might whistle a tune," said Melchett. "Was he going towards the bridge?"

"No. Other way—to village."

"I don't think we need concern ourselves with this unknown man," said Melchett. "You heard the cry and the splash and a few minutes later you saw the body floating downstream and you ran for help, going back to the bridge, crossing it, and making straight for the village. You didn't see any-

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one near the bridge as you ran for help?"

"I think there were two men with a wheelbarrow on the river path; but they were some way away and I couldn't tell if they were going or coming."

"You did well, my boy," said Melchett.

Sir Henry was silent—thinking. He took a slip of paper from his pocket, looked at it, shook his head. It didn't seem possible—

He decided to pay a call on Miss Marple.

She received him in her pretty, slightly overcrowded old-style drawing room.

"I've come to report progress," said Sir Henry. "I'm afraid that from our point of view things aren't going well. They are going to arrest Sandford. And I must say I think they are justified."

"You have found nothing in—what shall I say—support of my theory, then?" She looked perplexed, anxious. "Perhaps I have been wrong—quite wrong. You have such wide experience—you would surely detect it if it were so."

"For one thing," said Sir Henry, "I can hardly believe it. And for another we are up against an unbreakable alibi. Joe Ellis was making a table in the kitchen all evening and Mrs. Bartlett was watching him do it."

Miss Marple leaned forward, taking in a quick breath.

"But that can't be so," she said. "It was Friday night."

"Friday night?"

"Yes, Friday night. On Friday evenings Mrs. Bartlett takes the laundry she has done round to the different people."

Sir Henry leaned back in his chair. He remembered the boy Jimmy's story of the whistling man and—yes—it would all fit in.

He took Miss Marple warmly by the hand.

"I think I see my way," he said.

Five minutes later he was back at Mrs. Bartlett's cottage and facing Joe Ellis in the little parlor among the china dogs.

"You lied to us, Ellis, about last night," he said crisply. "You were not in the kitchen here between eight and eight thirty. You were seen walking along the path by the river towards the bridge a few minutes before Rose Emmott was murdered."

The man gasped. "She weren't murdered—she weren't. I had naught to do with it. She threw herself in, she did. She was desperate like. I wouldn't have harmed a hair on her head, I wouldn't."

"Then why did you lie as to where you were?" asked Sir Henry keenly.

The man's eyes shifted and lowered uncomfortably.

"I was scared. Mrs. B. saw me around there and when we heard just afterwards what had hap-

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pened—well, she thought it might look bad for me. I fixed I'd say I was working here, and she agreed to back me up. She's a rare one, she is. She's always been good to me."

Without a word Sir Henry left the room and walked into the kitchen. Mrs. Bartlett was washing up at the sink.

"Mrs. Bartlett," he said. "I know everything. I think you'd better confess—that is, unless you want Joe Ellis hanged for something he didn't do . . . No. I see you don't want that. I'll tell you what happened. You were out taking the laundry home. You came across Rose Emmott. You thought she'd given Joe the chuck and was taking up with this stranger. Now she was in trouble—Joe was prepared to come to the rescue—marry her if need be, and if she'd have him. He's lived in your house for four years. You've fallen in love with him. You want him for yourself. You hated this girl—you couldn't bear that this worthless little slut should take your man from you. You're a strong woman, Mrs. Bartlett. You caught the girl by the shoulders and shoved her over into the stream. A few minutes later you met Joe Ellis. The boy Jimmy saw you together in the distance—but in the darkness and mist he assumed the perambulator was a wheelbarrow and two men were wheeling it. You persuaded Joe that he might be suspected and you concocted what was supposed to be an alibi for him, but which was really an alibi *for you*. Now then, I'm right, am I not?"

He held his breath. He had staked all on this throw.

She stood before him rubbing her hands on her apron, slowly making up her mind.

"It's just as you say, sir," she said at last, in her quiet subdued voice. "I don't know what came over me. Shameless—that's what she was. It just came over me—she shan't take Joe from me. I haven't had a happy life, sir. My husband, he was a poor lot—an invalid and cross-grained. I nursed and looked after him true. And then Joe came here to lodge. I'm not such an old woman, sir, in spite of my gray hair. I'm just forty, sir. Joe's one in a thousand. I'd have done anything for him—anything at all. He was like a little child, sir, so gentle and so believing. He was mine, sir, to look after and see to. And this—this—" She swallowed, checked her emotion.

"I'm ready to come, sir. I never though anyone would find out. I don't know how you knew, sir—I don't, I'm sure."

Sir Henry shook his head gently.

"It was not I who knew," he said, and he thought of the piece of paper still in his pocket with its neat old-fashioned handwriting. *"Mrs. Bartlett, with whom Joe Ellis lodges at 2 Mill Cottages.*

Miss Marple had been right again.

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **HENRY SLESAR**

TITLE: ***Personal Interview***

TYPE: Crime Story

LOCALES: Boston and New York

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *The reporter disliked his assignment—the old man kept talking about the wrong things. But the newspaperman hung on patiently.*

IT WAS AN UNRENOVATED BROWNstone house, and surrounding the faded magnificence of its furnishings was the mingled odor of warm tea and lemon, boiled milk, and stale cereal. The reporter, a sour-faced young man named Briggs, sniffed the atmosphere distastefully, and wished the assignment was over. He waved aside the offer of more tea, and tried to get the old man to talk in consecutive sentences.

The old man was pleased by the interest of the newspaper, but he seemed to have missed the point of the interview. He was generous with his opinion on international affairs, tax laws, juvenile crime, and other newsworthy topics.

At last Briggs cleared his throat and said, "You don't understand, Mr. Hopkins. Frankly, we're looking for a more *personal* story."

"Personal?" The old man's eyes blinked and his yellowed mustaches quivered. "Ah, of course. Well, then. Suppose we talk about Gretchen."

"Who?"

"Gretchen, my wife. There's something *personal* for you."

"All right." Briggs sighed, then sank gloomily into the damp overstuffed chair with a teacup jiggling on his lap.

"I met Gretchen in Boston," the old man said. "Boston was my original home, you know, and that's where my father and grand-

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father founded the Hopkins fortune. I was seventy-seven years old, and Gretchen was thirty-eight —a young-looking thirty-eight, too. She was a secretarial assistant in our lawyer's firm, a very efficient and attractive woman.

"Well, I won't bore you with the details of my courtship. *My* courtship, did I say? No, I mean Gretchen's courtship. From the moment we met, Gretchen set her cap for me, and I knew it. She went about the whole affair with a boldness and directness of purpose that was so obvious it was amusing. Oh, yes, I knew what Gretchen wanted. What's more, I was ready and eager to give it to her.

"You look surprised. Well, don't be. At seventy-seven, I had few illusions about what the rest of my life would be like. Nothing could have pleased me more than to attract the attention of a good-looking, fortune-hunting young woman. I had few relatives I cared a snap for, and no friends I could trust out of sight. If Gretchen hadn't found me, I might well have started looking for someone like her myself.

"At any rate, Gretchen discovered me, and I was simply delighted. We had wonderful little dinners together in Boston, laughing over the transparency of our motives. I tell you, it was a charming relationship. She was fond of money, and I was fond of her. In all my business years I never struck a sounder bargain. And then, despite my friends and family, who were horrified at what they considered a dreadful alliance, Gretchen and I were quietly married.

"Our honeymoon could never be described as exciting. We traveled a great deal, uncomfortable as long journeys have always made me. We visited Europe the second year of our marriage, and the damp British weather almost killed me. Finally I convinced Gretchen to settle down to a more humdrum existence, in this very house.

"Everything was lovely for three years. Gretchen devoted a proper amount of time to me, and I was content. She knew what she was doing, of course. She personally supervised the writing of my new will, which left my entire fortune of nearly eight million dollars unconditionally to her.

"Gretchen was a handsome woman, as I've said, a plump, blonde little thing, still attractive to men. That," the old man sighed, "was the trouble. At the beginning of the fourth year of our marriage I learned, quite by accident, that Gretchen was carrying on with a young man.

"I was saddened by this information, but not totally surprised. I was past eighty by then, and no matter how I tried to convince myself that I was a remarkable specimen for my age, I knew that

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I could never keep such a spirited, robust—perhaps I should say, earthy—person as Gretchen forever at my fireside. Oh, her attentions to me didn't stop. I was still her little woolly lamb, and all that, but something had gone out of our relationship—an honesty, a straightforwardness.

"Finally, one day, I faced her with my information. She was as cool as ever, that plump little devil." The old man chuckled. "She admitted everything, and apologized for not having been frank with me. The young man, she told me, was named Mike, and he was a beer distributor. She argued that it wasn't love, not in the fine sense; she was just physically attracted to the brute. She said she was sure I would understand, and, strange to admit, I suppose I did.

"She began to bring this Mike to the house, on my own suggestion, but I really wasn't happy about it. I found him a coarse, uneducated sort. Eventually, we began to quarrel over him. Gretchen quarreled beautifully; she was a master of polemics. And she was equipped with one telling argument that never failed to silence me. If I disapproved of Mike, I had one simple recourse—to divorce her. That was a hard idea for me to face; I had become terribly dependent on Gretchen's kindnesses, and she knew it very well.

"Things might have continued this way for some time, until one night in October. I was sleeping in my bedroom upstairs, when the smell of smoke awakened me. I began to cough and choke, and rushed to the bedroom door, only to find it locked. I managed to get to the window, and found that locked also. I smashed the glass with a marble bookend, and shouted for help to passersby. They called the Fire Department. The blaze turned out to be fairly harmless—a wastebasket fire set by a lit cigarette. However, I should tell you that I have never smoked.

"The incident didn't improve the relationship between Gretchen and myself. Never once did I voice any suspicions about the fire, but she treated me as if I had accused her unjustly. Then, a few weeks later, I went down to our playroom in the basement of the house where for some years I had been enjoying the hobby of model railroading. The second stair from the top was broken—no, that's not correct, it had been sawed through. Fortunately, I was agile enough to grasp the handrail before falling.

"I never mentioned the doctored step to Gretchen, but quietly instructed the houseman to repair the damage. But the very next week, when an automobile almost knocked me down, I became seriously concerned. I arranged with a friend to obtain a revolver and a permit, and kept it close to me

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at all times. I wasn't sure just what protection a gun could afford me—from another convenient 'accident'—but its presence gave me a sense of security.

"I had the opportunity to use the weapon only four days later. Gretchen and I were sitting in front of the fireplace—this very fireplace—and my wife suggested a little evening walk. I hadn't been feeling well all day, what with the cold weather starting, and with my growing anxieties. But Gretchen was most insistent, and never having been able to withstand her arguments, I agreed. But some inner sense warned me to take the revolver with me.

"We went strolling along Fifth Avenue. Gretchen chattered happily and hugged my arm, and I admit that I enjoyed that moment of connubial warmth, despite its spuriousness. Gretchen insisted on walking in the park, and although I remarked that the park was not the safest place for an evening stroll, she continued to urge me. It quickly became obvious to me that her plan now called for direct action, that subtlety had been thrown to the winds. At any moment I expected Mike to deal me a blow from behind. Then, of course, Gretchen would scream—perhaps even struggle with Mike and allow him to take her handbag. The result would be another sordid item for the tabloids about city violence—that would be all.

"However, Mike made a serious mistake. He leaped from the bushes directly in *front* of us, wearing a workman's clothing. The disguise was pitiful, and I recognized him at once, but of course that wasn't important in the scheme. Gretchen screamed, not very convincingly, and Mike raised something black and leaden to strike me with. I shrunk from him, drawing the revolver from beneath my coat. I had never fired a revolver before in my life, but I did not find it difficult. I shot him directly in the middle of his forehead, and I believe he died instantly.

"A great number of policemen, none of whom had been even faintly visible before, quickly surrounded us. When the action was being explained to them, I found myself something of a hero, and even Gretchen simpered over me. The newspapers made a great deal over the affair, stressing my age primarily. I have the clippings somewhere, if you care to—no? Well, anyway, Mike was quite finished, and with him died the plot to shorten my life span.

"As for Gretchen—well, we had a long conversation that evening, Gretchen and I. Not once did I directly accuse her of complicity in the attempted murder, but we understood each other perfectly well. It was like old times again—a clear understanding of our mutual motives and desires. I was certain that Gretchen would never

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attempt such a thing again. . . .

"What's that? Oh, the will. Yes, I left the will alone. I explained to Gretchen that our original agreement would stand, but she would have to wait until more natural causes took me to my reward."

The old man suddenly trailed off, staring into his teacup.

The reporter said, "Well, that's all very interesting, Mr. Hopkins. However, it's not exactly the kind of story my paper is interested in right now. Suppose I ask you some questions?"

"By all means, young man."

"Very well. First of all, and most important, what is your *exact* age today?"

"A hundred and ten," the old man sighed, "and the loneliest birthday of my life. That's the trouble with living so long; your dear ones can't be with you to share the happy day."

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR:	**HERBERT BREAN**
TITLE:	***Nine Hours Late on Opening Run***
TYPE:	Detective Story
DETECTIVE:	Marty Malone, bus driver
LOCALE:	En route to Benton City, Pennsylvania
TIME:	The Present
COMMENTS:	*A solid, traditional detective story, "so round, so firm, so fully packed" . . . A bus with ten passengers—isolated by storm and flood—and an "invisible" murderer aboard!*

MARTY MALONE WAS BUTTONING on the freshly pressed scarlet tunic that still smelled of the cleaner's when a raspy voice filled the small dressing room.

"Malone!"

He knew the owner of that loud bark even before he turned. It was Calloway, the road boss whom every Inter-City bus driver cordially despised.

"This is Malone," said Calloway, jerking a thumb in Marty's direction and addressing the worried-looking man with him. Marty recognized Lloyd James, president of Inter-City Lines.

"I guess you know why you've been chosen for the first Benton City run, Malone," James said pleasantly. "We had to fight for even this one-month test franchise. Needless to say, the Trans-State people would like to see it queered, and tonight would be a good time for them to try something."

Marty said nothing. He had already thought of that.

"We felt with your splendid record as a former state policeman you'd be the best driver for the opening trip. And you know the run thoroughly by now, of course."

Marty's steady gray eyes glanced at Calloway. He did not know the

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run, of course—thoroughly, badly, or any other way. That was Calloway's doing. Two weeks ago the road boss had been ordered to let Marty take empty buses over the Benton City route every other day to familiarize himself with it. But Calloway, fearing the big ex-policeman as a possible rival for his own job, had kept Malone in the motor shop or twiddling his thumbs on the emergency list.

"That's all," Lloyd James was saying, "except the weather report isn't good, and the whole future of this company and lot of jobs are riding with you tonight, son. So—"

Marty shook hands with him. From above came the deep-throated roar of twelve giant cylinders, thundering in perfect rhythm. Unable to make himself heard, the tall lean ex-policeman snapped a confident salute to his boss, purposefully ignored Calloway, and leaped up the steps to the loading platform. His wrist watch told him he was due to pull out in just 75 seconds—and tonight he couldn't be late.

A mechanic was bent over the motor of the huge blue bus as Marty swung aboard and, with an accustomed eye, mentally catalogued his passengers. Two nice-looking young couples, one behind the other. Then a couple of pleasant-faced, elderly ladies with tickets efficiently stuck in the bands of their hats. A lone man, dour and foppishly dressed. And finally, in the rear, three men, two of them handcuffed together—convicts going to the state pen with their guard.

Marty snapped another glance at his watch. Fifteen seconds. Lightning suddenly flashed, illumining the dark street outside the bus terminal. Thunder crashed like an artillery salvo. There was going to be bad weather, and he'd never taken a bus over the dipsy-doodle Benton City highway in his life, he thought grimly. The mechanic approached the open window and spoke confidentially out of the corner of his mouth.

"Say, you better keep your eyes open, Marty. One of your passengers seemed awfully interested in your motor when I came out just now to check the timing. 'Course, I don't really suspect—"

But he was drowned out by the public address system which just then began the sonorous announcement Marty had been waiting for.

"Mountain express to Benton City . . . leaving at platform one . . . 'Bo-o-ar-d! . . ." And then, *sotto voce,* "Take her through, kid!"

Marty said, "What did you see?" But the mechanic was already backing away and Marty, out of the corner of his eye, saw Lloyd James and several other important-looking men watching from the platform. No time to stop now.

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He ground her into first and swung the big bus out into the dark, rainy street.

As it roared out through town and onto the Pennsylvania highway he wondered what the mechanic had started to say. He had plenty to feel uneasy about without something like that!

They were ten miles out from town and driving through the most torrential rainfall Marty had ever seen when it happened.

Something at his foot caught his eye—a little red tongue that flickered and was gone and then flickered again near the brake pedal. The motor was on fire!

Instantly he was braking her down as fast as he dared. Hot smoke burst from the floorboard. Someone yelled, "Fire!"

Marty skidded her off the pavement, grabbed the hand extinguisher, and was first out the door. He yanked up the hood and pumped a steady stream of white, flame-killing foam along the exhaust manifold where the blaze was centered. Meanwhile, passengers streamed out of the bus behind him, babbling in alarm.

It was over in a second and Marty smiled confidently at them. "A little waste oil that got over heated. Happens to all motors—nothing to worry about. Better climb in, you'll get wet."

Reassured, they started to return to their places. Marty bent over the motor, trying to see with his flashlight what had really caused the blaze. The male members of the two young couples behind him exchanged unpleasantries; apparently one had jostled the other's wife or girl during the hurried exit.

Then Marty saw what he was looking for: a little dab of white cotton that hadn't burned and was stuck under the exhaust pipe. Marty raised it to his nose. Kerosene—and, tangled in the cotton, charred kitchen matches.

Marty climbed aboard thoughtfully.

The rain was so thick now it interfered with his vision.

The road wound over hills and through valleys like a roller coaster . . . He was wondering what chance there might be of floods in the lowlands before Benton City when he heard a groan behind him.

Somebody's drunk, he thought. That might mean more trouble. He concentrated on the streaming windshield. The groan came again, louder, uncanny, hardly human—

And then a woman screamed as only a woman in mortal terror can.

Marty slowed the bus and snapped on the interior lights. One of the young men he had heard quarreling was slumped in his seat. The kid's eyes were open and rolling in his head, his saliva-flecked mouth agape. The pretty brunette with him was frantically patting his flushed face.

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"Bill! Bill! What's the matter?"

One of the elderly women walked up forward and looked at the youth.

"That boy's sick," she said decisively. "You'd better get him to a doctor."

Marty cut the lights, gunned the accelerator. Over his shoulder he started snapping questions at the girl. What she told him didn't make sense to his policeman's mind.

The boy hadn't been drinking. All he'd eaten for hours was a malted milk he got at the bus depot lunch counter where Marty had had one himself an hour ago.

The stricken youth's groans were horribly audible even above the motor and the wind and rain whispering at the windows.

"Who is he?" Marty asked the girl as he drove. Even crying she was remarkably pretty, he thought.

"Bill Hanewell, Junior," she said.

Marty's jaw dropped. "You mean—"

"Yes," she said. "*The* Hanewells."

Marty whistled. *The* Hanewells were one of the first families of the American theater. The late William Hanewell, Senior, this boy's father, had been Hollywood's best know portrayer of villain roles. Hanewell Senior's elder brother Thomas, was the stage's top character actor. Their sister, Myra, had won theatrical renown on three continents. And this fellow, if he was William Hanewell, Junior, had played minor roles as a child.

William Hanewell's son ill of a mysterious malady on an Inter-City bus! Swell way to inaugurate the new route, all right, Marty thought.

Suddenly, as the bus bounded over a hill, Marty saw not glistening pavement but swirling black water. It was too late to stop—the bus shot into it like a speedboat and he heard water hiss on the hot motor. They were on a small bridge, he saw, which crossed a stream so swollen by rain that its waters covered the bridge's floor.

The bus lurched to thirty . . . ten . . . five miles an hour . . . and bridge and bus shook sickeningly. Then they were at the end of the bridge and on higher ground and she started picking up speed. Marty's heart went back down in his chest. He'd have to stop at the next town and warn the police and highway people that the bridge was near collapse.

Suddenly the girl began to cry with fear.

"I can't feel his pulse," she sobbed. "He's . . ."

Marty stopped the bus hurriedly. He trained a flashlight on the boy. The kid's face was pale and still, the eyes open and staring. Marty knew he was dead.

And then the flash lit up something he hadn't seen until now. It

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was the kid's hand, strangely white and swollen as it hung limp. On the back of it was a small deep scratch that had oozed blood.

Marty cursed under his breath. This, he told himself grimly, was murder.

Murder on the first run! And the killer must be sitting right behind him some place.

Marty turned back, saying nothing. He needed time to think. Staring out through the windshield, he saw what he hadn't noticed before. His headlights flashed on black, swift-moving water. He turned on the spotlight. A wide fast current moved across the highway, at least an eighth of a mile of it. The lowland was flooded; they could go no farther—and he knew they could never be able to recross that shaky bridge behind them.

They were isolated with a murderer on a lonely stretch of highway less than a mile long.

Marty quietly explained their situation to his passengers. He did not mention murder. He said the boy had apparently died of indigestion or poisoned food, and that as an ex-state police officer he would take charge. He forbade anyone to touch the body pending arrival of the proper authorities. Alarmed exclamations burst from the passengers, but Marty's quiet manner helped to reassure them.

He turned on the lights; cigarettes were lit; the people began conversing in awed tones. The other young couple brought out a small battery radio and tuned in to the Benton City radio station, which was broadcasting flood warnings. It predicted the waters would continue to rise for some hours.

While one of the elderly women, whose name turned out to be Lonergan, tried to comfort the girl with young Hanewell, Marty briefly considered the situation.

One thing was uppermost in his thoughts—solving the killing before it could become a long-drawn-out newspaper story that would bring the bus line reams of unwelcome publicity.

The rain slowed down, stopped. Taking advantage of the lull, Marty asked Hanewell's girl to accompany him outside for a breath of air. When most of the passengers followed, Marty led the girl off to one side.

"Were you his wife?" he asked.

"I was going to be," she said in a voice that was low but steady—you couldn't help liking a kid like that. "We were to be married tonight in Benton City. His father's will stipulated that Bill must marry and settle down before he was twenty-five or he'd have been cut off without a penny. We only learned that recently. He would have been twenty-five tomorrow."

Her name was Betty Foster and she'd known young Hanewell for two years, having met him in the

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New York publisher's office where he had worked while living with his uncle and aunt. She had been just a stenographer and, Marty gathered, Bill Hanewell had kept their romance a secret from his rather exalted relatives.

"Who might have wanted to murder him?" Marty asked gently.

"Murder!" It was a half scream.

"Let's keep this to ourselves," Marty warned.

"Oh, no one would want to kill Bill," she choked. "He had no enemies. No one could kill him!"

Marty touched her slender shoulder sympathetically. "Sorry, kid, but I'm afraid someone did."

The rain began pattering down again. The passengers climbed aboard, chilled and silent. Either some of them had heard the girl's exclamation, or the dark night and the dead man, stiffening in his seat under a rubber poncho, were beginning to get on their nerves.

Marty helped the girl aboard. Since the bus was blue with cigarette smoke, he didn't hesitate to light one. That was how, in the match's flare, he chanced to see the shiny little pinpoint sticking out of the leather crease in the big driver's chair.

Without hesitation he lit his cigarette. Passing his hand over the seat with elaborate casualness, he glanced around to see that all his passengers were aboard, and then sat down. But concealed in his hand he now held a short hypodermic syringe. He pulled the curtain that hung behind his chair and studied the syringe carefully, revolving it between his fingers so as not to smear possible fingerprints.

"Yes! There was a print—and a good one! He removed the lens from his flashlight and used it as a magnifying glass, studying the whorl pattern of the print until it was sufficiently well fixed in his mind so that he could surely recognize it again.

Then he daubed some of the hypo's contents on the road map and sniffed it. It smelled faintly bitter. Morphine—enough to keep him asleep many hours.

Marty stared at the syringe. Someone on the bus had wanted to kill young Hanewell and had succeeded. Then, overhearing Marty tell Betty Foster it was murder, and that he was a former policeman, the killer had decided to eliminate him from the investigation for a while.

Even now someone was sitting back there, waiting for him to collapse from the stiff dose of morphine that would have been injected into his shoulder the instant he sat down had he not spotted that needle.

Well, someone was going to be disappointed.

Marty stepped off the bus and scraped black grease off the motor. From his ticket pouch he took some glossy envelopes. Then, he

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climbed back and faced his passengers.

"I'm going to ask you to help me," he said. "To all but one of you, I may seem a little crazy. I'm not. With the aid of this grease and these envelopes, I'm going to take everybody's fingerprints. I'll explain why when I've finished. Now then, Miss Foster, you're first."

He scrawled the girl's name on one of the envelopes and expertly pressed her fingers on it after lightly coating them with the black grease. Slowly he proceeded down the aisle. The other young couple —he learned their name was Robertson—made no objection. Then the two elderly ladies, a Mrs. Johnson, who had warned him to get young Hanewell to a doctor, and a Mrs. Lonergan. They seemed to be becoming good friends. Next the lone man, who said his name was Marlowe.

It wasn't until he reached the grim trio seated in the rear that he met the resistance he had been expecting.

"I ain't gonna be fingerprinted no more," growled one of the two convicts.

"Nor me," agreed the other. "We ain't done nothin'. We're cuffed to each other, ain't we? What could we have done? The hell wit' you."

With a fine disregard for rules governing the care of prisoners, their guard methodically backhanded each face.

"Give him them prints or you get it next with a gun butt," the guard growled.

Unwillingly the convicts presented grimy hands. Then Marty fingerprinted the guard, whose name was Hannigan. Finally he took his own prints.

Marty hurried up forward, where the light was better. This case was going to break in a hurry! He examined the two convicts' prints first, suspecting that in spite of the handcuffs one of them might somehow have . . . They didn't correspond.

Carefully he checked every print —100 in all . . .

Marty lit a cigarette, glad his face was hidden from the others.

A man had been murdered. Then a hypodermic had been planted in his own chair. They were completely isolated. All the passengers were present and accounted for. All had been fingerprinted—and Marty was too old a hand at the game to fall for wax fingertips or any other sort of fingerprinting trickery.

Yet the print on the syringe didn't correspond with a single print of anyone on the bus!

Turning, Marty considered the nine people who sat there, wrapped in silence or whispering. The two elderly ladies chatted like nervous magpies. Marlowe was watching him sourly. Betty Foster stared out a window and dabbed

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at her eyes. The Robertsons both looked pale and distraught. The convicts were sullen and wordless, their guard sleepy.

Which was a killer?

Marty got up. He removed the poncho from young Hanewell and in the light of his flash examined the wound in the boy's hand, his other hand, his face, neck, head.

There were no other signs of violence.

Marty turned to young Robertson, several seats back.

"You had a few words with this fellow a while ago," Marty said pleasantly. "What do you know about poisons?"

Mrs. Robertson paled visibly. Marty heard the sharp intake of her breath. He turned on her like a flash.

"Maybe you'll tell me," he said, his voice now grim.

"He didn't mean anything," the woman stammered. "That other man—the one who's dead—pushed me as we got out—when the motor caught fire. It was just an accident but—well, Bert's hot-tempered . . . But he couldn't do anything like that. He wouldn't *poison* anybody—"

Robertson said angrily, "I may as well tell you because you'll find out anyway. I'm assistant research chemist with the Conway Drug Corporation. I know plenty about poisons. But I didn't have anything to do with this."

Robertson sounded as if he were telling the truth. Marty asked him a few other questions. No, he hadn't noticed anyone approach young Hanewell. No, he hadn't gone to sleep at any time, because—

"I'm getting tired of this!" snapped an irritated voice.

Every eye in the bus swung around. The single man, Marlowe, was down the aisle.

"I didn't intend to spring this so soon," he barked. "But I guess it doesn't make much difference now. I'm Ralph Marlowe of the Public Utilities Commission. I'm aboard as an observer for the State Commission and my report will help decide whether you people get the franchise. Get that, driver?" He stared at Marty contemptuously.

"So far, you've violated just about every rule I can think of. Why haven't you posted flares as a warning to the traffic coming behind? Why haven't you tried to find a dry place to take your passengers? Why did you insist on proceeding when you knew these lowlands were bound to be flooded? Why, you haven't even collected the tickets yet! State policemen and bus drivers are all alike. Soon as one of you guys gets into a uniform—"

"Yes, sir," Marty said quietly. "But the flares are superfluous—we're isolated and no traffic is going to come up behind us from that bridge. No one could predict

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whether these lowlands would be passable or not. And as far as a dry place goes, this is as dry as anywhere. I don't know the country off this highway, but from what I've seen, there's not a house for miles."

"There's a forest ranger cabin somewhere along here," stormed Marlowe. "All you Inter-City drivers are alike. You—"

"Oh!" Marty smiled. "All we Inter-City drivers. But I suppose Trans-State drivers are supermen, eh? Listen, Mr. Marlowe. Trans-State wants to queer this run. And they wouldn't be above bribing a state inspector to help queer it—if they found one they could bribe. Someone who'd be glad to stir up trouble or turn in a bad report for a thousand or two. Does that make sense to you, Mr. Marlowe?"

Marlowe went dark red. He shouted, "You can't talk to me that way—!"

Marty laughed. "As far as the tickets go, I'll take 'em now if it will make you any happier," he said. "And then I'll go out and see if I can find that ranger's cabin."

"You'll catch your death, going out in that rain, young man," said Mrs. Johnson.

"Indeed you will!" said Mrs. Lonergan.

"Thank's ladies," grinned Marty. "I'm pretty rugged. Tickets, please." He reached out to take the little square of pasteboard from Mrs. Johnson's hat. But he never took it. It wasn't there. Mrs. Johnson's ticket had disappeared.

Marty refused the second fare the woman offered to pay. She had had a ticket—he had seen it.

But it was kind of funny, at that. How could she have lost it, when it had been thrust so far down in her hatband?

The rain was beginning to slacken, Marty found as he swung off the bus. It pattered up and then down to a whisper repeatedly. Striding along in the darkness, he realized he'd be lost the instant he ventured away from the highway.

He walked on, hoping to find the trail Marlowe had described. The rain beat up to a steady roar, held for several minutes, then suddenly died away. That was why he heard the stealthy footstep just behind him.

He ducked instinctively, recognizing even as he whirled that the sound meant danger. He sensed an arm passing over him, then saw the dull glint of a knife. From his crouched position he launched an uppercut with all his 190 pounds behind it.

The blow glanced off a cheekbone instead of landing cleanly. A knee jammed into Marty's stomach. In spite of himself he bent over, pain stabbing his belly. At the same time his right hand found his opponent's and he was twisting the other's wrist with all

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his might. He heard the knife tinkle to the pavement, then an animal yell of pain. Another kick thudded into his stomach. His head swam in a sea of nausea and he could no longer hang on to his attacker. He heard footsteps running away as he sank to the pavement.

The rain had stopped for good when he recovered sufficiently to start making his way back to the bus. He found the passengers standing around it stirring cramped limbs and getting fresh air.

Without offering an explanation for his limping walk, Marty climbed onto the bus and sank into his seat.

Marlowe climbed in after him.

"Well?" he demanded.

Marty lay back in the driver's seat, his face pale and his eyes closed. Those two kicks in the stomach could have killed the average man. But there was no sense in trying to explain to Marlowe.

"Since you've decided to take it easy," rasped the state inspector, "I guess it's up to me to find the cabin. And when I do, don't think I won't telephone a nice little report about the kind of drivers Inter-City employs."

He left. After a little, Marty sat up. He took the thermos from his lunch box and sipped hot coffee from it. That helped. The pain was dying away.

Betty Foster and Mrs. Lonergan got back on the bus. The girl was crying and the older woman sought to comfort her. Marty tried to ignore them and concentrate on the problem confronting him. The person who attacked him had been a man—of that much he was certain. Strolling around in the dark, as they had been, any one of the passengers might have followed him, attacked him, and got back to the bus before he did. Or could it be that . . .

Handling it gingerly, he took from his tunic the knife that his assailant had dropped. It was short and lean-bladed, and along the cutting edge was daubed a faint line of something sticky, redolent . . . Poison, he was certain. He put the knife away, and as he did, Betty Foster broke into a torrent of weeping at something Mrs. Lonergan had said.

"But he *was* my husband," she cried. "We were married a year ago in Mexico. We never said anything about it because we were afraid of his family. Then, when his father died and we learned that he had to be married to obtain the estate, we both were afraid the courts might not regard the Mexican marriage as valid. That's why we were going to get married again tonight."

"I'm so sorry, my dear," said Mrs. Lonergan. "I didn't realize . . ."

Betty continued to cry quietly. Presently Mrs. Lonergan left her.

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Marty lay back, thinking.

Twenty minutes later, chilled by the night air, the passengers began straggling aboard again. Marty looked at his watch. Almost four o'clock. He glanced up as the gray-haired, pleasant-faced Mrs. Johnson got aboard. And his jaw dropped. The missing ticket was back in her hatband.

Marlowe returned soon afterward.

"I've found the ranger's cabin I mentioned," he told the other passengers importantly, ignoring Marty. "The driver can take us to the foot of the path which leads up to it. If you care to walk about a quarter of a mile up a hill, I can guarantee you a fire and food."

The others assented eagerly. Marty turned the big bus around without a word and started driving back the way they had come. He was uncomfortably aware that he had failed to make any progress. And, at the ranger's cabin, he would have even less chance to watch his suspects. But to insist on their staying where they were would be to play directly into Marlowe's hands.

A murder had been committed, and someone—apparently someone on the bus right now—had twice tried to kill him; yet he had no clue whatever to who that person was. Or had he? The thing had a shape, a certain form; but if he had followed the vague outline correctly, then there was still something to come, some break that was overdue . . .

Marlowe barked contemptuously. "Pull up here. There it is."

The passengers got out, led by the state inspector. Betty gave Marty a questioning glance as she passed.

"I'll stay here and keep an eye on things," he smiled. Her tear-wet eyes returned the smile and then, arm in arm with the two older women, she strode off in the glare of the spotlight with which Marty illumined the path for them.

When the last one had disappeared, Marty lit another cigarette. He felt better now. If only he could get that one missing piece to the puzzle! Well, there was nothing like going out and looking for it.

As he swung off the bus in the dark, he felt like a man going into a duel blind-folded. He didn't even have a gun!

Making as little noise as he could, he walked along the edge of the highway. It would be dawn before long, but it was still utterly black. The rain had stopped. The wind rustled the trees and occasionally blew cool puffs in his face, as if to warn him back.

Suddenly he saw something glowing in the darkness. He stared ahead, straining to pierce the night. No, it couldn't be—but there it was. A light that glowed faintly but steadily.

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Softly, on tiptoe, he inched forward. It took him ten minutes to cover fifty feet. Then he saw what it was.

The glow was the dashboard light of an automobile. The car door was open, so he could see it clearly. What he could not see clearly was the large bundle that lay on the seat, dimly outlined by the dashlight. But from that bundle, pale and ghostly, protruded a human hand—a hand that did not move.

Marty crept quietly forward. This might be a trap. But somehow he knew it wasn't. Somehow he knew what he was going to find even before he reached the side of the car—even before he pulled back the blanket from that dead body—even before he uncovered the face of Mrs. Johnson.

Examining that protruding hand, Marty saw the little scratch in the tip of one white, horribly swollen finger.

A waking bird chattered behind him and in spite of himself he jumped. Then he laughed shortly, snapped out the light, and sat down in the car to do a little more thinking.

Dawn had well advanced when he rose. He unscrewed the lens from his pocket torch again and in the increasing light examined fingerprints on the door handles and steering wheel of the expensive sedan. Almost immediately he grunted satisfaction. Just as he expected, they showed the same prints as the ones he'd found on the hypodermic syringe.

The mystery was solved. But the killer wasn't caught yet—and Marty wasn't even sure he had a case!

Immediately he started back toward the trail that led to the ranger's cabin. He felt an increasing uneasiness. It had been a cruel murder—the thought made the lean, hard-jawed bus driver break into a steady lope up the highway—because there might be another.

His face was pale as he scrambled up the steep rocky path. Supposing, in spite of what he knew, the killer managed to succeed again. Marty had looked death in the face often enough—but it had always been his own life that was at stake. Now he was responsible for someone else's.

A cold moisture beaded his forehead as he reached the top of the hill and found the ranger's cabin, smoke pluming from its chimney. He burst in without knocking. Mrs. Lonergan, Robertson, Hannigan and his two convicts were sipping coffee near a blazing fire. A tall man in the green of a ranger waved a greeting.

"Thought you'd be up after a while. Have some coffee?"

"Where are the others?" asked Marty tensely.

"Why, what's the matter?" asked asked Mrs. Lonergan.

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"Where are they? Where did they go? Hurry!"

"I told them about the path down the other side of the hill," the ranger said. "Miss Foster wanted to get into town as soon as possible and I told her she might possibly get through that way. The others went with her."

Marty jumped out the door and raced to the back of the clearing where a narrow pathway led off among the trees. In the soft loam he saw the fresh imprints of men's and women's heels.

Running with reckless abandon, he hurled himself down the pathway. The sun was up and dappled the forest floor but in spite of it the tall thick trees made the woods strangely gloomy.

And then, above the hoarse panting of his own lungs, he heard the sound of voices. He slowed to a fast, stealthy walk and almost immediately came in sight of his quarry. Marlowe and Betty Foster walked side by side down the path. Behind them came Mrs. Robertson—*and Mrs. Johnson.*

Marty heard Betty say: "I'm a bit tired. Couldn't we rest a minute under that big oak?"

Marty crept softly through the bushes until he was crouched behind where they were sitting.

"I do declare," said Mrs. Johnson, "there are some lovely wild flowers around here. I think I'll just gather a few."

In a few moments Mrs. Johnson came thrashing back through the brush, her arms laden with flowers. "Here, my dear," she said, holding out the big bouquet to Betty. "I'm sure the very sight of them will make you feel better."

Betty looked up. Mrs. Johnson said, "Careful they don't scratch you."

And at the same instant Marty leaped from his hiding place.

"Not this time," he said, and knocked the flowers to the ground.

Something gleamed in Mrs. Johnson's hand; she lunged at him, her face contorted. Marty dodged the slashing blow, grabbed the wrist, twisted the hypodermic from it. Mrs. Johnson swung a vicious right-hand punch and cursed hoarsely. Marty smiled and brought up a right from all the way back. His fist crashed squarely into Mrs. Johnson's face. She dropped to the ground, unconscious.

The two women stared at him with horrified eyes, and Marlowe snarled, "You damned bully! Hitting an old woman!"

Marty reached down and jerked a gray wig off Mrs. Johnson's head. Then his hand smeared her face into a phantasmagoria of lipstick, rouge, and facial wax.

"Allow me to introduce," he said triumphantly, "the murderer of William Hanewell. In case you don't recognize him—although you should—he is Thomas Hane-

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well, the dead boy's uncle and one of America's best-known character actors. I think you've seen him in his last role—hey, catch her!"

But Betty Foster had fainted.

Back in the cabin the ranger handed Marty a second cup of coffee, and the big ex-cop began gulping it.

"Basically, this was one of those simple and obvious crimes," he said. "A boy who is about to make himself eligible for a large inheritance is suddenly murdered. By whom?

"Well, very likely by the person or persons who would receive the inheritance if he failed to become eligible. Who are they? Obviously, the other immediate members of the Hanewell family. In this case, there were only two—the uncle and aunt, Thomas and Myra Hanewell.

"That's so apparent that, although I thought of it at once, I couldn't believe it. Like most people, I was fairly familiar with the appearance of both Thomas and Myra Hanewell. I knew they weren't on the bus—at least, not as themselves!

"That suggested disguise, and I realized what a perfect murder scheme it made possible. As actors, both Hanewells were experts at makeup. Suppose they created two characters and in those characters committed a crime? When their disguises were removed, the characters would disappear forever!"

Betty Foster interposed, "A New York gossip columnist printed a story about Bill and me going to get married. Bill's uncle telephoned him long distance from New York to offer congratulations. Bill told him all about our plans."

"And thereby gave him all the information he needed for his own plans," Marty took it up. "His plans were simple. Disguised and armed with everything he might need—including, I suspect, his own personal hypodermic—he took the same bus you youngsters took. His sister, Myra, made up and dressed *exactly like him*, and followed in the car. Incidentally, before we got started he sneaked some kerosene-soaked cotton into the motor while the hood was up during final motor inspection. It was virtually certain to start a fire and, in the excitement that would cause, he'd get the chance to scratch his nephew with that poisoned needle without Bill's noticing.

"After Bill died, he could easily stop the bus on some pretext, get out for a minute or two, and exchange places with his sister. Thus he'd remove all the instruments of murder and the guilty fingerprints. If murder was suspected, Myra Hanewell could be searched without the possibility of anyone's discovering anything.

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"Well, the perfect crime worked—up to a point. Thomas Hanewell got off the bus when we all did after discovering young Bill was dead. He sneaked back to the car that he knew was somewhere close behind us. But he forgot to give his sister the ticket in his hatband. It was the one point of dissimilarity in their appearance, and I was lucky enough to spot it.

"Then, when I took your fingerprints and the results seemed to show that someone had miraculously got on the bus, planted a hypodermic in my chair, and then got off, all without being seen, I was pretty sure two persons were at work somewhere. And when I went exploring in the dark and was attacked by someone who was certainly a man, and not an elderly woman like the suspicious Mrs. Johnson, I was sure of it. That was Hanewell, of course.

"I came back to the bus and heard Betty tell Mrs. Lonergan she and Bill were secretly married, and Mrs. Lonergan told her new friend, 'Mrs. Johnson,' I suspect. And Mrs. Johnson—Myra Hanewell—realized that Betty, as Bill's widow, was entitled to the inheritance.

"You people remained outside the bus, strolling around for a while—remember? That gave her an opportunity to slip off and warn her brother. He took Myra's place on the bus, bent on killing Betty. Before he could, you all left for this cabin, and I set out to find the headquarters from which I was sure the criminals were operating.

"I found their car—with Myra Hanewell dead in it. She'd scratched herself with the tin box that held the poison."

Hanewell, tied up on a bench, laughed. "Awkward cow!"

"Then I realized this fellow would try to get Betty as soon as possible. That's about it, I guess."

Marty paused. Mrs. Lonergan said, "Pretty smart, young man."

"It wasn't so smart," he said. "We're nine hours late right now on the opening run. There's been a murder on it . . . . the state franchise we were hoping to get looks like a dead pigeon."

"I'm afraid you're right," Marlowe chuckled.

"I wouldn't be too sure of that," said Mrs. Lonergan. "I think this boy deserves his franchise."

"Well, I think he doesn't, so he won't get it," snapped Marlowe. "And I'm with the Public Utilities Commission."

"I think he will," said Mrs. Lonergan.

"Who are you, the boss of the state?" Marlowe asked sarcastically.

"In a manner of speaking," replied Mrs. Lonergan. "To be exact, I'm the governor's mother-in-law."

And for the first time since the start of that trip, Marty Malone relaxed.

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EDITORS FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **PATRICIA KNOWLTON**

TITLE: ***Man in a Closet***

TYPE: Crime Story

LOCALE: The Big City

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *Alfie was on the lam, but he had sprained his ankle and was now holed up in a closet. When he awoke he heard the darnedest conversation ever written outside the private worlds of Saki and Roald Dahl. Delicious!*

THE SOUND OF THE OPENING DOOR woke Alfie. His two-day beard itched furiously, and the pain in his ankle was worse. He stayed perfectly still.

The first voice was female.

"Well, Cousin Frederick May," it said, "here's the little old place."

Alfie shrank in upon himself. He hadn't meant to fall asleep. Only to rest for a minute, on account of the ankle. He was hunched on the floor in the far corner of a closet, half under a low shelf.

"Goodness, Ellen Louise," said a male voice, "why, this is downright pretty."

Alfie nearly nodded. He wished his sister Mabel could see the apartment. A parlor with a real fireplace, a blue kitchenette where he had found the loaf of bread, a papered hallway where little gold chairs sat beside a table with candlesticks on it.

"I'll have to remember things just right to tell Cousin Lucy Lewiston," Cousin Frederick May said. "She did regret so much that she couldn't come with me."

Alfie could tell right off that it was a one-woman establishment, soon as he got in the window—everything was so neat. Mabel was always whining about how she only got to use a corner of the bedroom where the little kids slept.

"Now, Cousin Frederick May," Ellen Louise was saying, "you make yourself comfortable while I tend to

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the kitchen. I thought I'd serve up some of that Lapsang you and Cousin Lucy Lewiston are so fond of."

Footsteps passed the closet door. Alfie shuddered. If he hadn't sprained his ankle getting up to the window ledge . . .

Footsteps passed the door—coming back this time.

If they had only been able to make the contact with Eddie's friend . . .

"Just tell me every little thing about everyone," Ellen Louise said. "Was mama feeling better when you left? How's Marie Belle? And Loring?"

The big trouble was, Eddie had stood too near the light last night. Alfie hadn't been ten yards away when they picked Eddie up. The first day after they'd done it, it hadn't been so bad, him and Eddie, the two of them together. Alone it was rough. He wished he dared go home.

"And she has a new filly, sweetest little creature you ever did see," Cousin Frederick May said. "Your papa was saying only the other day what a way you have with horses, Ellen Louise. How he does like to watch you ride!"

Ellen Louise laughed. It was a young laugh, like the young-looking clothes in her closet. Alfie wished Mabel could see them, especially the shoes. Rows and rows—tennis shoes, dancing shoes in silver and gold and even in velvet, pumps and sandals and hiking shoes and riding boots with wooden things inside them, just like in the movies.

"Cousin Frederick May," said Ellen Louise, "I just know you're trying to make me homesick. I've got one of the very most exciting jobs of all the girls in my whole class. Goodness, I'd never be able to hold up my head again if I gave it up and went home."

"We miss you, child," said Cousin Frederick May, "Especially your mama and papa miss you."

Alfie's ankle hurt so much it was almost singing. He couldn't help thinking that where Eddie was now they have doctors, and he hated himself for the thought. You have to be tough. That's what Eddie always said.

"I know they fret to have me home," said Ellen Louise, "but you can see for yourself, Cousin Frederick May, I'm not so miserably set here. No need for worry. It's just little old me, same's always."

Footsteps again.

"I keep the Lapsang in here," Ellen Louise's voice said, very close, "with some of my treasures."

The door of Alfie's closet opened. He fought a terrible urge to close his eyes.

A thin arm, in a transparent white sleeve, reached up to a shelf just inside the door. Alfie could see the corner of a very blonde head. He stayed as still as if he were paralyzed.

"That old water ought to be hot now," said Ellen Louise, and the closet door slammed shut. Alfie knew she hadn't seen him.

The lock snapped, from outside.

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Alfie stayed still as death. If he hadn't been so hungry and so dog-tired he wouldn't have come in through the window. If his ankle hadn't twisted . . . if he hadn't dozed off . . .

"Imagine," Cousin Frederick May said, "having Lapsang all the way up here. Wait till I tell Cousin Lucy Lewiston *that*."

"Oh," Ellen Louise said, "we're not as barbarous as you think."

She couldn't have seen him. Alfie let his breath out. But the lock?

"You know," said Cousin Frederick May, "I just promised your mama and papa . . ."

Ellen Louise laughed again, high and trilling, almost a giggle. "It's a real pleasure to see you, Cousin Frederick May," she said, "and I think it's really sweet of you to come."

Maybe Eddie shouldn't have pulled the gun. The shooting would make it bad for them. Well, he could be tough. Alfie felt his holster.

"Let's see now, do I remember rightly that you like cream? Now confess, Cousin Frederick May, you promised you'd stop off and do your very best to talk me into coming home."

"My," said Cousin Frederick May, "that tastes good. Just think, Lapsang all the way up here. It's not easy, you know, to get a good cup of Lapsang in Chataqua. Yes, child, your mama did ask me to say that she misses you dreadfully."

"Come now," Ellen Louise said, "she asked you to do some special pleading. Make me homesick. Talk me into it."

"Isn't that bouquet lovely?" said Cousin Frederick May. "Well, in a manner of speaking, yes—ah, that is, I said I'd pay a call, ah . . ."

"I know," said Ellen Louise. "Mama's just scared to death. I can tell. She thinks the city's one big den of thieves and criminals, and I'm in mortal danger every step I take. You can see for yourself, Cousin Frederick May, it isn't the way mama thinks. Why, here we sit having our old Lapsang in my little old living room, same's ever, quiet as churches."

"Just a mite more, thank you," said Cousin Frederick May. "Tastes just exactly right after a train ride. Now, Ellen Louise, you know your papa's eager to have you back home too. I don't think there's ever been a young woman in our whole family lived all by herself. Not if she could help it. It just doesn't seem right, somehow."

That's about what Mom told Mabel. No kid of mine tramps off by her lonesome, Mom said, not on your life. It ain't right. Why, it ain't even *safe*, she said, and belted Mabel a couple. Didn't stop Mabel whining, though.

Ellen Louise said, "I know what papa worries about. He thinks of great big, brassy, bossy women boasting about how they can take care of themselves. He wonders whether I'll turn out like that, and nobody'll want to marry me. A little more? There. You can see for yourself, Cousin Frederick May, it's just little

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old me, same's ever. Why, my goodness, there are just millions of people here to help me out if ever I need help."

The way the ankle had swelled up, Alfie couldn't figure how to get out of the building if he ever did get out of the closet. He couldn't run; that he knew. Even if Eddie had solitary, they'd let the doctor in. Alfie despised himself.

"Just one sip more before your train time," Ellen Louise said. "I'll ride down with you and see you off."

"Thank you," said Cousin Frederick May. "Wait, just wait till I tell Cousin Lucy Lewiston that you could give me a perfect cup of Lapsang. Why, this is almost as good as being at home."

"You just tell them," said Ellen Louise, "that's it's only little old me up here, same's ever. No cause to fret."

There were footsteps, and the outside door closed.

For half an hour Alfie tried every way he could think of to get out of the closet. The lock was one of those little snap things, only it worked from the outside.

The sweet, perfumy smell in the closet made him groggy. He wished Mabel could have smelled it. Alfie was resting, hugging the ankle, when the new voices came toward him.

"Women," said the one, with feeling.

"Calls from downtown to say there's someone in her closet."

"Sergeant says follow them all up. Man under the bed, man in the hallway, man in the brain, man in a closet."

"Yeah. Man in a closet, why not call right away? She goes downtown, tra-la-la, happens into a railroad station, remembers—oh, yes, dearie me, la-diddle-da—did I happen to lock someone up a while ago? So sorry I didn't call earlier—busy, you know." His voice was high and mimicking.

When the door opened, Alfie was still hugging the ankle. The cops stared down at him, and he stared up. The bigger one held a gun.

"Well, well, if it isn't li'l Alfie."

Alfie rose and they snapped on the cuffs. The ankle was screaming.

"What kind of deal is this, Alfie?" the big guy asked, jerking him down the hall. "Whyn't she report when she saw you, huh? Friend of yours? Lovers' quarrel?" Alfie scorned to reply.

"Yeah," said the other. "It don't figure. Locks little Alfie up, goes leisurely off to think it over." He poked at Alfie. "How come, huh?"

"We book her as an accessory," said the big cop. "Suspicious character." He pushed Alfie's weight onto the bad leg.

"Speak up, kid," said the other. "We book her?"

Alfie spoke. "Nah," he said, and suddenly was terribly afraid. He thought maybe he was going to cry.

"Listen, you guys, listen," he said urgently. "What's Lapsang?"

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR:	**SHIRLEY BARKER**
TITLE:	***The Darkened Stair***
TYPE:	Detective Story
DETECTIVE:	Dr. John Dee
LOCALE:	London
TIME:	The year 1560
COMMENTS:	*Dr. Dee, the Queen's Astrologer, was no penny soothsayer. He believed there is no secret knowledge, that all is written in the stars. But with every unloved wife in England fearing for her life, Dr. Dee mistrusted even the stars . . .*

'TWAS AN ILL TIME THEN IN England for unloved wives, as even I, Taffy the Welshman, could tell without reading the stars or looking into my master's magic glass. So when the blue-eyed lady in the jewelled cloak came to our house in Tower Street that autumn afternoon, and told us, with tears and strong tremblings, that she feared her husband was taking steps to make a widower of himself, we could well believe her; for it had happened in the Four Kingdoms before. It had happened scarce two months back, or, at least, many folk whispered that it had, in the case of Sir Robert Dudley who paid such hot court to King Harry's daughter, our red-haired Queen.

It was all some twenty years ago now, and I am no more the smooth-cheeked greenhorn lad I was then, but somewhat grizzled and more tart of tongue; so if you want to hear the tale, you must cool the quick blood of haste and let me unwind it in my own way. I shall begin with myself, as every man's story must begin.

My name was then and is now,

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Arthur Gwyllow, but the ignorant 'prentice lads took to calling me Taffy when I was new here, and the tag has clung. My parents died when I was too young to remember them, and I grew up in the house of a shepherd in the hills above Llangollen. The year I turned nineteen—1560 it was, or thereabouts—I ran away from him in lambing time, and that for no better cause than that I had heard peddlers and wayfarers talk of London, and I longed to go and see it for myself.

Trudging across the shires in the sharp spring wind, I remember that I felt sure I would rise to be Lord Mayor, perhaps by the time I was fifty or so. It was as easy to imagine being one as being the other, but as I have said, I was nineteen—a fool's age—and stepping into what I have come to fear is a foolish world.

I can ill remember how I kept myself in bread and cheese the first few days I was in London, and it does not matter even to me any more. But I had not been there long before I heard that servants and poor lads looking for a master should go to Paul's Walk, and stand there in the aisle of the great cathedral with its pillars thrusting upwards like forest trees; stand and wait till some well-disposed gentleman came by and asked them about their strength and skills, and offered them wages and told them what to do.

So I went there and stood, and marvelled at the city's dirt and clamor, the sharpness of men's tongues, and the folly of their fashions. And on the third day, a tall man in black velvet hose, a flowered waistcoat, and a skull cap, bent towards me and smiled, and spoke.

"Duw yn rhwydd!"

I had not heard the Welsh spoken since I left Llangollen to come into England, and I was so startled thereat that I answered his blessing with a gasp and a sputter and dropped the one crust of bread I had hidden in my jersey coat. He reached over and took my hand and shook it heartily, and went on speaking in our own tongue. For he was a Welshman himself, he told me, from Radnorshire, but he had risen to be the Queen's Astrologer and needed a lad to serve him; so he had come here to the city's hiring mart. He had come to seek a lad from his own country, he said, since he deemed them the most apt for his business, and he told me I had the sternness of the Welsh mountains in my face, and in my eyes the softness of its rivers.

I should have told him I knew not of stars and signs, but he was kind and I was hungry. I went home with him and continued in his service some months, till he called me to him and told me he had arranged that I should come here to Whitechapel to work for a

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shoemaker. He said he thought I would be happier in that trade. So I have been, indeed, but I was not unhappy in his household either, for he was wise and a good man, and I honored him although I never understood him. But to go back to the time when I was still his 'prentice, and the blue-eyed lady came to tell us that her husband meant to put her away forever. I can still see her sitting there as plain as if she were scarce a fortnight gone.

Dr. John Dee had rooms at the top of a fine house in the west end of Tower Street turning north, a house that had once belonged to an alderman who built himself a brick turret so that he could better observe his neighbors' affairs, but it did him no good, for scarce had he finished it when he went blind. We used the turret to watch the stars at night, swung over the roofs of London and the fishful river of Thames and the country villages on the Southwark shore. Casting horoscopes was not all my master's business, for he studied other starry matters, too: their names and courses and behaviors, and the distances between them. Astronomy is the name of that science, I mind. And he was ever a searcher after knowledge, rare books, and rare men. That afternoon he had bade me apply myself closely to the long table under the south window crowded with beakers and retorts, where I was supposed to keep close watch on a wooden rack of vials full of a curdled-looking fluid and call out to him if any change came across the face of them. He himself was slowly turning a globe mounted on a spindle, and by his side, under its green cloth cover, rested his magic glass, across which visions sometimes passed.

Outside the window the day was all going down in sunset the color of a dove's breast, wine-grey and red and tender blue. The reflected glow seemed to set fires a-burning in the Thames, and lights pricked out in the cottages on the far bank, and I could not help turning from the vile-smelling potions before me to look at the world and the sad loveliness of the great grey city in the November evening time.

It was then that we heard her timid tapping on the oak door between our outer room and the stone stair winding down. So far as I knew, my master expected no visitors, and he was not one of the penny soothsayers in Smithfield who are always being troubled with the affairs of scullery maids and poor tradesmen's wives. Gentlemen and scholars consulted him leisurely and with due appointment, and much of his time was devoted to advising the Queen.

We looked at each other and I made a motion to rise, but he waved me backwards and went himself to open the door. I

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watched him bow and usher a lady into the room, place a carved, cushioned chair for her, and seat her therein. Then he called to me to bring candles and to stir the fire. As I moved about to obey his bidding, I heard snatches of their talk, as much of it as I might, and with that lady there, I felt no desire to stare out at the sunset any more.

She seemed young, scarce older than I was. Her eyes I have spoken of, but not the lashes that sheltered their blueness, nor the silky dark of the hair under the rich hood, nor the long slender lines of her body, her dainty feet and hands. She was very pale and her heavily ringed fingers laced themselves in and out one moment and the next lay very quietly in her lap. Lady Frances Tattersall was her name, she said, wife of Sir Richard Tattersall, and she had come here at the advice of one of the Queen's own maids-in-waiting.

"You must help me, Dr. Dee," she pleaded, "for it is my very life that I fear for. And I can trust no one. No one, I say. To whom can a woman turn when her natural protector—?"

The lean rosy face of my master had a wary look at first, but smoothed itself out as she went on talking.

"I do not think you can know, sir, how much the Court esteems you. And her Majesty—she sounds your praises everywhere! Did you not choose the day that would be most fortunate for her coronation? Did you not proclaim that her destiny was higher than her sister's destiny—that when her sister was Queen and she lay in prison? They say you have secret knowledge of everything that will befall."

My master cleared his throat. "There is no secret knowledge. What you refer to is all written in the stars for those who would read it there. I am a student of the writing, not a master, and I cannot always interpret a-right. But I try, I try. Such readers must also have a knowledge of women and of men."

She did not answer but looked appealingly at him. I went to draw the curtains and shut out the lights of the city far below, to shut out the cold wind that was rising with the dark and was rattling the casements and swirling the dead leaves high. I noticed a flock of rooks against the dying sunset and remembered that in my village many rooks meant death. When I returned to my bench, Dr. Dee was speaking again.

"How can I help you, Lady Frances? In what way?"

She bit her lips and seemed so loth to answer that he went to the corner cupboard and brought her a glass of wine. Holding it in her hand, not drinking any, she seemed to be struggling to get the words out.

"You have heard—it is gossip,

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of course, evil gossip—but you have heard—"

"I hear most things, Lady Frances," said Dr. Dee.

"It is only gossip, I am sure, but as you know, there are many who believe Lady Amy Dudley's death by accident was no accident at all. They believe it was—arranged—to free her husband, since he has found such great favor with our Queen."

My master nodded. "Broke her neck falling down a flight of stairs at her country place, did she not? Unfortunate, but surely a mishap. The courts were satisfied, I believe."

Lady Frances flung out her hands in a helpless gesture.

"Yes, the courts were satisfied. And Sir Robert was satisfied! And the Queen! She, too, is satisfied, no doubt! But what of the rest of us—we other women whose husbands are wearied of us and look elsewhere? How can we be sure we shall not fare the same?"

My master shook his head and answered quickly, an air of trouble drawn about him like a cloak.

"Surely Sir Robert can hardly have brought the mischief to pass. He was at Windsor at the very hour. In the midst of the whole Court. Lady Amy had sent her servants to Abingdon Fair. She caught her foot, perhaps, or a faintness came upon her and there was no one to aid. I cannot believe—"

"I *can* believe," said Lady Frances, and it might have been the firelight that caused the sudden flash in her soft eyes. "I know what it is, sir, to have a husband turn from you and wish you gone—to Hell or anywhere, so he can be free."

"You are young, my lady, and beautiful. That Sir Richard has found a fairer face, I cannot credit. You will pardon me."

She leaned back and closed her eyes. "My face has but a single fault, Doctor. It is only one face. My hair is dark. He favors dark hair, but he favors also gold and brown and ruddy. His fancy roves and he would be everywhere. If he had Venus to wife, he would be gone after Argive Helen, and having enjoyed Helen, he would take after the huntress, Diana. You have heard there are such husbands. You are not a schoolboy, Dr. Dee."

The last words brought a smile to my master's face, but it was quickly gone leaving only a look of compassion.

"I see. Yes, truly such men there are, and I have heard of them. But my lady, how can I help?"

She rose and began to pace backwards and forwards across the Turkey rug worn by the tread of heavier feet.

"He wants to kill me, Dr. Dee. I can see it in the way his lips curl back before we kiss, in the hot anger in his eyes as they fol-

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low me about the room. Last week he brought me a sweetmeat, and I was ill from it. Last night an arrow came at me as I reached out to close the casement, and shivered against the pane at my side. The garden was searched, and the opposite towers, but we found no stranger about. He was in his room—he said."

Horror darkened my master's eyes. "I can hardly believe—"

"Ah, it is well nigh a Court fashion now," and she laughed wryly. "At Michaelmas time, Lord Thornleigh's barren wife—a sure rider, but she fell from her horse in the hunting field. They say he means to marry one of her own maids who is already some four months gone. And at Hallows Eve, Lady Rose Otterley—in the grounds of Greenwich Palace. She was found in the pool among the gold and silver fish. Her husband? Oh, no, it could not be he! He was at the gaming table with a dozen peers around to prove it by. But his French mistress shops in Cheapside for a wedding gown, they say. I tell you, Dr. Dee, every good wife in England looks sideways at her husband these days. And often what she sees in his face makes her afraid."

The Doctor stroked his pointed beard and studied her closely.

"Have you a father living, my lady? Or a brother? Some male kin who can help resolve the affair?"

She sat down again, wept a little into her lace handkerchief, and began to tap her satin-slippered foot. I clenched my two hands and wished I had her husband's neck in the space between.

"No. My father is dead and my brother is a young lad at the tutor's. It will take more than a gallant with a gilded sword and a curled wig to resolve this. It will take your great wisdom, Dr. Dee."

"I would if it were great enough to build a shield around you, but I do not see how I can be of any use at all."

"I—I thought—all I could think of to save myself was that if you would read my stars and tell me when I am in danger most—tell me if it is time for me to die, and if his plans will succeed—if I may thwart them."

"Do you know what his plans are?"

Terror clouded her eyes. "Why, I suppose because of what happened to Lady Amy, it is in my mind that he might try somewhat the same. In our house it would be easy for him. It is all towers and shifting levels—stairs and steps everywhere."

"Where is this house?"

"Along the Strand and past. The last of the great river houses. Where the thorny marshes are, round Westminster Village."

"Can you not confine yourself to some suite of court or garden rooms level with the earth? What

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is the range of your private apartments there?"

Her fair face colored, and she looked down. Her words came rapidly.

"Why, you must know that I occupy a fine chamber with its dressing room and a bath scarcely less splendid than the Queen's. My maids lie beyond. It is at the head of a great flight of marble steps going up the center of the house. They are wide and well-lighted and have velvet on the treads."

"I do not see any breach for treachery there. No beams could be cut, no threads drawn across. But there are others, you say?"

"Yes, there are others." She was still looking down. "My husband has his own room directly under mine. He spends much of his time there with his books, and his hounds overrun it. There is a small private staircase between us, a narrow way, and dark, and all polished mahogany. It is this stair that I dread. He could well lay a trap for me."

"Why make use of it?"

"Oh, I do not!" she cried, all impatience again. "I do not—unless I must. But he can contrive. Sometimes he calls to me—bids me run and fetch him something from his closet—not often, but sometimes. And if I seem to fear it, then he will know that I suspect, and try even another way."

My master tapped his fingers on the desk and stared into the bright fire. I knew I should withdraw to our tiny scullery to slice the brown loaf and heat up last night's rabbit stew, but I did not want to leave till I found out if he would give the poor lady his help. This he seemed willing to do, for he said finally, "Very well. I will set up your chart and see what warnings may lie therein. When were you born, and where?"

"I was born in Devon," she told him simply, the tenseness seeming to have left her now that she had gained her desire, and her delicate mouth even smiled a little. "In the year 1540. On October the 29th."

Lady Frances, I reckoned swiftly, was now just twenty years old.

"And the hour?"

"It seems I have heard my mother say it was about sunrise time."

"Under Scorpio," murmured my master, "a twisted and tangled sign. There is much good and much evil there. I cannot tell till I have made my calculations. I will let you know."

Lady Frances rose and drew her cloak around her. "Let it be soon," she prayed, clasping her hands.

"It will be soon. Tomorrow, perhaps. And have a care for tonight. How will you spend the evening, my lady?"

"Why, we go for late supper and dancing at Durham House."

"You together with your husband?"

"Yes. He and I."

"That is well. You will hear

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from me before another nightfall."

He followed her to the door and she was already at the stairs when I heard him say, "One thing more, my lady. Your husband? Have you his hour and his day?"

After a brief pause her voice came back clearly. "Not the hour. But he, too, is from Devon, and he was born in April—the 12th, I think—in the year 1513."

Her slippers tapped on the stairs, and she was gone.

I hastened into the scullery then and prepared the stew and bread and a dish of pickled peaches for my master. When I brought the tray to him he was seated before the fire, his long legs stretched out and his lean hands clasped on his doublet, the knuckles showing white.

"Taffy," he asked thoughtfully, "have you heard the talk she mentioned? That not only Sir Robert but other men of rank—?"

I had indeed heard it, but I was suddenly afraid that he might not be paying proper mind to the lady's fears, so for good measure I made up a case myself."

"Yes, Master," I said. "I hear it has spread beyond the Court, too. 'Twas the talk in Billingsgate Market this morning that an oyster wife had been dowsed in Fleet Ditch by her husband so that he could marry a tapmaid from the Liberties."

Dr. Dee shook his head then and reached for his bowl of stew.

"Eat well, Taffy, lad," he said. "We have a crow to pull between us this night, and the wind is keen."

"We are going out, Master?" I cried in disappointment. "You are not going to stay here and read the poor lady's stars as you promised?"

Again he shook his head and smiled at me. "No, Taffy. We must not leave her affairs to the stars. They are a long way from Westminster, and the danger is great. We shall settle the matter ourselves—if it is in our stars that we succeed. We shall go forth bold as Mars and Jupiter, lad."

But he was the one who went forth alone at the beginning of it, having set me about what seemed as useless a chore as I was ever put to in my life. For he bade me drag three great featherbeds out of our house and pile them in the street; one being his own, and the other two borrowed from the landlady in the basement. This being done, I sat down upon a corner of the heap and waited for him to come back.

It was indeed a sharp night, the sky all sprinkled with bright stars, and a crescent moon in the air over Bermondsey, and a keen wind whipping round the corners, blowing the dead leaves gable-high. I looked down the winding row of lighted windows in Tower Street and thought of Lady

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Frances Tattersall dancing at Durham House. At least, I hoped she was dancing, and not lying spent and broken at the stairfoot, as Lord Dudley's wife had lain.

There were few folk in the street and hardly any carts at all, so I was quick to notice the small vehicle like a farm wain drawn by a shaggy raw-boned nag and rumbling on iron-rimmed wheels over the cobblestones. I watched it come nearer and draw up in the shadows only a few paces off before I realized that the man driving it was my master, and at that very moment he called to me.

"Up, Taffy, and heave the featherbeds aboard."

I hoisted the unwieldy sacks into the back of the cart, and then at his further order climbed up beside him and drew my shoulders together inside my jacket for better warmth as we drove away. There was no one loitering round the conduits in Cheapside, and all the shutters were up in Goldsmith's Row. We left the city by Temple Bar and drove westwards along the Strand, the great river palaces on our left, with glimpses of moon-lit water flashing between their dark gardens, and to the right the small shops and dwellings of humbler folk.

My master said little save for telling me that we were going to Westminster and he had hired this woodseller's cart to take us there. Once we stopped at a tavern called The Checkers, its neat door painted in squares of black and red, and here he took a glass of sack and would have ordered the same for me had I not pleaded with him to get me country ale, since it was my common drink and I was used to the workings of it.

As we came out of The Checkers and climbed into our cart again, he pointed riverwards to a grove of fine trees, and above them a mass of square-notched towers on the sky.

"Yonder is Durham House, Taffy. I hope our lady dances there; that the evil has not yet had time to fall."

"You agree with her then that evil is like to fall, Master?"

"Yes, very like.' And at that he sunk his chin on his yellow-starched ruff and said no more, and I found that I, too, had nothing further to say. The mansions lay behind us now, and the shop fronts, and the few cottages we passed were dark and closed, their dwellers gone to bed long ago, for it was very late. Clumps of alders and willows drew thickly in, and straggling rows of thorny hedge with standing water between. Our wheels no longer grated and rumbled, for we were in the country now, following a road of hard-packed turf.

As we rounded a curve, the shaggy nag snorted once and slowed his pace, for the way turned sharply upwards to higher

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ground. Just ahead of us showed a little cluster of lamp-lit windows, and another cluster beyond that. Then to our left the river curved close again, and another great house loomed through a mesh of crooked elm boughs on the night sky. Dr. Dee pulled the cart to a stop and looked about us.

"This is Tattersall House, lad. It was pointed out to me from the river once, but east or west, the pattern of its chimneys is still the same, and yonder lies Westminster. Yes, we must be there."

"What do you think to do now, Master?" I said, feeling empty and helpless and a long way from home.

'Why, I shall stroll about, here in the shadows, and enjoy the moon. I shall have time for my favorite study, Taffy, for the stars are ever brighter in the country than when one must peer at them through the smoke of town. I would name you the major planets and where they stand if only you could bide with me—which you cannot do."

"We are to part, then?" I asked him. I was not pleased with the idea, not at all.

"For a time, for a little time. I shall open the gates for you, and you will drive through them with the cart. Knock at the first door you come to, have up the servants, and tell them Sir Richard Tattersall bade you deliver these feather-beds there. Say that he won them in a jesting wager tonight at Durham House and that he wants them taken directly to his own private chamber and piled there in the stairwell where they will be no nuisance till he can dispose of them."

"Yes, Master." I did not like the task, but I could see where it tended now.

"And arrange them carefully there, Taffy. Pile them about the walls at the stairfoot so that anyone tumbling from above can come to no harm."

"You think we can save the lady so?"

"I think we may."

I had little liking for my dubious errand, but it turned out well enough. A sleepy porter answered my knocking and called a big mild wench who showed me the chamber I sought and made no fuss about it. I found the flight of mahogany steps between the brick and timber walls, and I padded all the narrow space at the bottom of them. Then I returned to where my master waited, clapping his hands together to warm them, his breath blown white before him on the air.

"Now we must wait, Taffy," he said.

So we waited—less than an hour, I think, though it seemed more—till we saw a link boy coming along the road from the city, swinging his lantern on a pole. Behind him walked four sturdy bear-

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ers with a sedan chair. My master held up his finger for silence, and we stood quiet in the shadows till the group had passed us, gone up the winding path between the clipped yews, and paused before the arched, nail-studded door. Then Dr. Dee motioned to me, and we strode swiftly after them, reaching Tattersall House just as a gentleman handed Lady Frances down, sprang after her, and waved the chair away. Standing just behind my master, I looked straight at Sir Richard Tattersall.

The man was handsome—or had been, perhaps as little as one year ago. Of middle height he was, dark-eyed and dark-haired, save where the locks at his temples gleamed silver in the moon. But his clear-cut features were a little too thin and sharp, and his slim shoulders drooped wearily. Worn-out with raking, no doubt, was the thought that came into my head. He put his fingers on the lady's puffed velvet sleeve to lead her into the house, but my master stood forth and accosted them.

'Pardon—my lord, my lady—but it is an urgent cause that brings me here so late."

I was watching Lady Frances as she stood there under the link boy's swaying lantern. Her lips smiled, but there was a questioning look in her eyes.

"Why, Dr. Dee," she cried, her voice a note or two higher than I had remembered it, her pale cheeks flushing. "I had hardly expected you would finish your calculation so soon."

She turned to her husband. "Richard, you have heard of Dr. Dee, the Queen's Astrologer?"

"Indeed I have," answered Sir Richard, bowing courteously towards my master, question and bewilderment in his deep eyes.

My lady went on hurriedly. "And I consulted him today—oh, I know I should have told you, but it was all on your behalf. I have been worried for your health of late, and I thought the stars might advise us thereon. You have come to report to us, Dr. Dee?"

Worry clouded her pretty face as she turned it directly towards my master. She must know surely that her danger was great, since it had brought this noted man to Westminster Village in the middle of the night. I could not help but wonder what he meant to do. Confront her husband with his wicked intent, perhaps, and face the villain down?

"May I accompany you and Sir Richard to your chamber, my lady? The matter is such that I can reveal it only there."

Sir Richard frowned and my lady's voice rose even higher, but they were gently bred and gave no other sign of discomfiture.

"Forgive us, Doctor," she answered. "We keep you too long in the cold."

Sir Richard led his wife through

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the wide doorway, up the marble stairs, and into a circular apartment hung with deep-rose velvet, and lace, and mirrors, furnished with rose-carved oak. A fire burned on the hearth, and Lady Frances went over and stood with her back to it, her cloak still about her. Her husband stood possessively at her shoulder. Dr. Dee paused a little ways off. My feet would take me scarcely beyond the door. There we all waited for a moment, silent as a dumb show or actors between their lines at a miracle play. Then Sir Richard moved his body restlessly.

"As I understand it, sir, my wife consulted you in regards to my health. You have drawn star charts and made calculations and found some matter of moment there?"

The lady spoke before my master could. Her voice was high no longer, but low and troubled now. Could she be afraid that he would give her secret away to her husband? I was a little afraid of it myself, for what he meant to do, I could not know.

"I told you Richard had a project," she whispered, her face like parchment and her mouth drawn. "The project of regaining his health was of course what I had in mind? Will he suceed in his aims? Tell me this, sir. Only yes or no, and then leave us, pray. You will forgive me. I feel ill and tired. The porter has money by. He will discharge our debt to you."

Dr. Dee looked steadily at the noble pair in their fine clothes, Sir Richard puzzled and annoyed, the lady shaken with fear. Finally he spoke. "I am sorry, Lady Frances, but this night's work is not so easily done. Please trust in me if you do not understand. I mean only good here and no ill."

Sir Richard cleared his throat. "You are known and respected as a man of parts, sir. I am willing to believe you have not come here in idle jest but to some purpose. Would it please you to make it known?"

How straightforward and honest he seemed, I thought, for all the brazen villainy behind. Obviously he took no proper account of my master. Did he not fear being uncovered in his sin? But why did not the good doctor reassure Lady Frances? Why did he allow her to be frightened so?

"I will make it known, sir," replied my master, a grimness about his usually gentle face that I had never seen there before. "But it will hardly please me."

He took a step backwards and considered them for one tense moment. Then he spoke.

"Lady Frances, will you go down the inner stair to your husband's chamber and fetch a book to me? Any book."

Dismay shone in her eyes and blurred the inner glow that lighted all her beauty.

"I cannot, Dr. Dee. You know

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why I dare not perform—that one thing. I have already told you."

Sir Richard drew his brows together and clenched his hands with impatience, but he spoke no word.

"I pledge you, my lady, you may safely come and go by the stairway. No man's hand has laid a trap for you there. I beseech you to do as I say."

"No!" she cried. Her features stiffened like water when the frost moves over it and took on the harsh, ugly look of stone.

"You will not go by the private stair and fetch me any book from your husband's chamber?"

"I—I—no."

"Sir Richard," my master's voice was steady, but he spoke with a rising excitement in his tone, "will you go the errand down the stair for me?"

"In a trice, if it will help get this business over."

With a bewildered look at his wife and no further hesitation, the master of Tattersall House strode to a low door half hid in the rose-colored hangings. He pulled it open, stepped downwards, and pitched quickly out of sight. It was my lady who uttered the one stifled cry.

Dr. Dee caught up a brand from the hearth and rushed to the opening through which Sir Richard had disappeared. I followed hard upon him, wanting to see too. We stood there at the top of the narrow stairs, under the bright torch, peering down. Sir Richard, floundering and cursing, tried to pull himself from the heap of feather-beds below.

"Hast taken any hurt, sir?" called my master.

"God's blood, I think not, but small thanks to your soothsaying," blustered Sir Richard, as he heaved himself to his feet and made his way carefully up the stairs. A step or two from the top he bent down and picked up a few round white pebbles. Dr. Dee reached over and took them from him. The three of us stepped back into Lady Frances's chamber. She still stood where we had left her, looking down, not moving, tearing her handkerchief into tiny shreds and letting them fall on the floor.

"Why did you try to kill your husband, my lady?" asked Dr. Dee.

She lifted her head and made one last effort, but she looked none of us in the eye. "But he was the one who would try! He meant to murder me. I have told you before."

He was not so much the learned doctor now as the schoolmaster explaining a sum to a slow scholar who could not learn.

"Sir Richard set no trap. He was not the wary one. It was you who feared to descend the stair. It was you who knew there was death in waiting. I did not know how you would arrange it, but now I see."

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He held up the white pebbles, all perfectly shaped, and smooth, and round.

"There are others," muttered Sir Richard, a look of sick anger in his eyes. "When I set my foot on the third stair they began to roll under my shoe soles this way and that. I could not stand. I plunged to what would have been my death —but for the mattresses there." A light flashed over his face. "Did you know the featherbeds were awaiting me, Doctor? Did you know I was sure of a safe landing?"

"I was sure of it. My servant had arranged it so."

"But how—? And why—?"

Sir Richard was staring at his wife.

"Her reasons are her own and unknown to me, my lord, but I believe it was this way. Before you left for Durham House I believe that your lady scattered the pebbles on the stair, planning that later in the night you should descend by that way and fall. With the brick and timber walls at the bottom, you could not well escape a smashed skull or a broken neck. Then she had only to gather up the pebbles and there would be no trace of what had caused the 'accident.' No pegs that might have held a rope in place, no treads weakened or cut away. When the news of your mishap went abroad in the city, she would be able to call no less a person than Dr. Dee to witness that her husband had meant to kill her, since she had visited me and prepared my mind for that. She would declare that you had likely fallen while setting the trap for her, and make such a fine story of it that everyone would believe. I was not certain she meant to move so swiftly and arrange the matter for tonight, but I feared lest she would do so, and I could not chance a delay—so I came. I made sure that whoever was threatened, the stair would be harmless to either. Has she been ill, my lord, from a sweetmeat, or endangered by a mysterious arrow shot?"

"A sweetmeat? An arrow? I know not what you mean."

Sir Richard was still staring at his wife, on his face a look of horror and revulsion. "Frances," he muttered, "is this true, what they are telling me?"

She did not answer, but she lifted her eyes and gave her husband a desperate glance that put me in mind of a charge she had made against him the afternoon before. Truly, it was plain in her face that she wished him gone—to Hell or anywhere, so she could be free.

My master's voice rose, "Seek not for truth in her, Sir Richard, for in her there is no truth. I have not read your horoscope, my lady, but that Mercury, the patron saint of liars, was rising when you were born, I can well believe. Good

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night, sir. Deal with her as you will. It is no more my affair."

"Master," I asked him mournfully, as we crossed Fleet-Ditch and turned south into Thames Street below the hill, "how did you unwind this topsy-turvy thing? Did you know there in your study last night that the lady did not speak the truth?"

"I knew—when she left me."

"Will you tell me how?"

"It is my duty to tell you, since you are my 'prentice boy and your chief wages are to be instruction. Did you notice, lad, the date of the lady's birth? Did you figure her age?"

"Why she was born in 1540 and thus is twenty now."

"She is indeed. And when was her husband born?"

I drew my brows together and rubbed my jaw and thought, but for the life of me I could not remember when.

"I am afraid I paid no mind, sir."

"Well, I will help you. He was born in 1513, so now how old is he?"

It was a simple sum. "He is forty-seven, master."

"Now do you see?"

But I did not see, and after a moment I admitted it to him. I have never forgotten his reply.

"You have heard me say, Taffy, that a man must know more than the stars to be truly wise. He must know women and men. When an old man is married to a young wife, if one plots the destruction of the other, it will not be he. That is as true as the theorem of Pythagorus, my son."

I have always remembered it indeed, though it was many years ago, for the whole adventure left its mark on me. There was never any talk in the city of Lady Tattersall's evil plan and how we had thwarted her. The couple went on together before the world, much as other couples do. In the end, Sir Richard outlived her, for she died of smallpox and he was drowned when his waterman failed to shoot London Bridge one stormy afternoon.

As for good Dr. Dee, I have not seen him in years, but I have had news of him lately that troubles me. He is past fifty now, and is reported to have taken to himself a wife whose age is twenty-two. I hope he has not forgotten his own wisdom, and that he will tread carefully whenever he finds himself on a darkened stair.

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The world-famous humorist in a deadly serious mood . . .

KILL OR BE KILLED

by OGDEN NASH

NATURALLY IT NEVER OCCURRED to lawyer Brander Gillis that sudden death would be his either to give or to receive.

He was not a shyster, but a professional man of open mind who presumed his clients to be innocent until after the acquittal; not a usurer, but a friend of man, always willing to rent part of his hard-earned money to the needy for what it might be worth to them; not a blackmailer, but a discreet and reasonable trustee of distressing information. In his home he was neither a miser nor a tyrant, but an unswervable advocate of economy and discipline, two virtues the lack of which had deposited so many deplorable examples in the hard chair facing the light in his modest offices.

There was not an ounce of jealousy in his body — as indeed why should there be? The wistful light that glowed in the eyes of his wife when they dared glance at each other was easily extinguished by a mere twist of the wrist, the slightest pressure of the thumb on the nerve center.

And if his wife's sister occasionally gave him a look that no one could like, it did not affect her efficiency as cook-housekeeper or her devotion to that strange girl child of hers with the thick lenses and the thick speech, that child who, as he was careful to remark with commendable frankness when the roast beef was overdone, would perhaps be far better fed in an institution.

As for Burger — soft-footed Burger — butler, chauffeur, handyman, door mat, he knew which side his bread was buttered on, as well as which side of stone walls he wanted to eat it on. No, Brander Gillis had nothing to fear from man or devil, and his thoughts did not often turn to God.

Why, then, on one particular weekend did this good man with nothing to fear remove the bed of his unprotesting wife to a guest room and take pains to lock himself in alone each night? Why was he careful never to turn his back to her? Why did he wait, spoon poised, to taste his soup until his sister-in-law had first swallowed hers? Why did he continually flick Burger into cringing hysteria with one sharp, almost inaudible phrase?

Perhaps the episode of the roller skate had disturbed him, though it was plainly attributable to the slovenliness of a backward child. But his fall after stepping on the skate at the top of the stairs had been a severe one, aggravating the pain he still felt from his previous fall in the bathtub,

© 1947, by Ogden Nash; originally titled "The Other Mind Reader"

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a mishap he could not understand. He, who was proud of the luxurious remnants of his hair, the plump resiliency of his beloved flesh, who used nothing but the whitest of Castile, had trod on a cake of pink soap nearly invisible against pink porcelain.

Still, if accidents really come in threes, he should have nothing more to worry about, and certainly there was nothing mysterious about the other misadventure. True, he could have sworn that the car was in the driveway when he dozed off after so skillfully guiding it home from the cozy apartment of a cherished client, and it had been a surprise to awake to find himself behind the wheel in the garage with the doors closed and the motor running — but a man gets used to these discrepancies when he likes a little drink once in a while.

Perhaps his apprehension had started with the book. It was called *How to Be a Mind Reader*. The dark, ungainly child had been absorbed in it for days, so the reasonable result of the roller-skate business was its confiscation. Unreasonably, she had not been upset. "I know everything in it," she declared with complacence, "I can read every mind in this house. A certain someone wants to kill you, Uncle Brander.

"Someone besides me," she added reflectively.

Gillis was a hardheaded man, but that was the night he banished his wife, and the first of the nights that found him hunched over *How to Be a Mind Reader;* scoffing, then comprehending, finally believing. It was at Sunday supper that he suddenly looked through the smooth, uncommunicative foreheads of his wife, of his sister-in-law, of Burger the butler — and Brander Gillis knew the identity of the certain someone.

He locked himself in his room early, and because his need for the book was past he did not miss it from the bedside table. Brander Gillis sat in his chair all night, not awake, not asleep, and dreamed a dream.

It's kill or be killed, dreamed Brander Gillis, *kill or be killed.* And being a hardheaded man, he forthwith dreamed the unsuspected, the undetected, the undetectable, the perfect murder.

He was smiling when he woke and glanced at the door, well bolted, honestly locked. *Let me just run over it once to make sure,* he thought. *I seem to forget some of the minor points. . . .*

"Never mind," said a hateful and familiar voice behind him. "I remember."

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An EQMM "first story" — à la **Black Mask**

THE LIQUIDATION OF PICKLE FAT

by JOHN BARDEN

JOHNNY ALMOST MISSED IT. HE slammed to a screaming stop on the hot red brick of Route 206A.

The place was a back country drive-in with a single gas pump and a shack under a red neon sign, *Liquor*. Johnny backed in, fast and steady, beside the car parked near the shack. It was the right car, a blue-gray job with a soft dent in the hood creased by a human head probably not quite dead at the time of impact. Pickle Fat's car. Finding Pickle Fat at a liquor spot was like finding a thousand dollars—only better.

Johnny stood a moment on the stoop of the shack under the glare of the sun with his eyes shut tight. It would be dark inside, and he must see everything at once, instantly, as he walked in. It was also time for thinking.

Pickle Fat was big and, for his size, fast. He was rotund, but it was mostly muscle developed in a West Virginia coal mine on a Joy loader. If Pickle Fat got the jump, there would be a fight. Events had made him mean and scared, but Pickle Fat was yellow the way hit-and-run drivers are yellow, the way wife-beaters are yellow.

Johnny was only durable. The sleeves of his clean blue shirt were rolled high on muscular arms that were well formed but not heavy. The blue denims with ineradicable grease stains were not nearly filled by his wiry legs. In a fight Johnny might give Pickle Fat some trouble—but only a little trouble, that's all. So there could be no fight.

Johnny had something better than fists. A woman had given it to him—a woman named Millie, in a hospital. A gift of love to Johnny and a gift of hate to Pickle Fat. Johnny was armed with gifts . . .

When a glimpse of the sun-drenched dust of the drive-in hurt his eyes, Johnny walked into the shack. He saw Pickle Fat sitting in a booth, a steak and a double whiskey before him, gnawing a chunk of steak with stainless steel front teeth. A farm-girl waitress and an old man were behind the bar. Johnny covered the end of the booth because if he had been Pickle Fat it would have crossed his mind to run for it.

"Hullo, Johnny." Pickle Fat spoke without moving.

"Whatcha runnin' for, Pickle Fat?" To the police Pickle Fat was

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Clyde Routzang, identifiable by two stainless steel teeth. Bar fly friends thought he was called Pickle Fat because he drank a lot. To Johnny, Pickle Fat was Pickle Fat because he ran the pickle house at LaRive Drop Forge where scale is boiled off forged steel with muriatic acid.

"Who says I'm runnin'?"

"You didn't show up in court."

"Millie tell you I was taking Route 206A?"

"Millie told me everything." Johnny picked a chair from the table behind and sat down blocking the booth. The chair might come in handy too. "The boys at the plant want you back, Pickle Fat."

"Pleasures me to hear the boys is thinking about me."

"They're thinking about the hundred bucks they put up for the bond you jumped."

"Sent you to bring me in, huh?"

"I owe it to 'em. I told 'em you didn't hit that kid, Pickle Fat."

"They should of sent two of you."

"Just me."

"It don't figger."

"I got the desire."

"Desire's a big thing, Johnny, but it ain't enough."

"A man does big things when he has to. Either I bring you in or I lose a thousand bucks outa my pay."

"Don't the bonding company put up the thousand?"

"Sure, and when they lose it, like when you don't show up in court, they go after the cosigner. That's me, Pickle Fat. You told me you didn't have nothin' to do with that hit-and-run. You only left your fingerprints on one of the kid's shoes and some paint offen your car on his head. You told me you was at Paddy Wagner's till two in the morning. That ain't what Paddy says. He says you walked outa there drunk at ten thirty. But I was your friend, Pickle Fat. I was your friend because of Millie. I believed you."

"I had to get outa that jail, Johnny. They put me in a cell by myself and fed me nothin' but crackers and water."

"I ain't your friend any more, Pickle Fat. I'm taking you back to that jail."

Pickle Fat had finished the steak. He pushed the plate away. "Let's you and me have a drink before we start."

Johnny looked at the double whiskey. "You got a drink."

"I said let's you and me have a drink. Then you can start tryin' to take me outa here because if you can't take me outa here, you sure as hell ain't takin' me back to the city."

Johnny stared. Then he said softly, "Sure."

"Hey, you!" Pickle Fat called to the waitress. "Two doubles."

"Bring the bottle," Johnny told the girl.

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Pickle Fat laughed and downed the double shot in front of him. It must have warmed him a little, but he shivered. Johnny watched. The double was not enough.

The waitress brought the bottle and two shot glasses.

"Make it water glasses," Johnny told her.

The girl didn't argue. She went back for water glasses.

Pickle Fat said, "I'll have to lay you out hard, Johnny, and the girl and the old man besides. I'm gonna need two or three hours start from here. Is it worth it for a kid that's already dead?"

The girl returned with the water glasses.

Johnny set them together, filled each more than half full, matching them exactly. He pushed one to Pickle Fat. "Don't hit the girl like you hit Millie."

"Aw, when I hafta hit a woman, I hit 'em in the belly. Saves their faces."

"You didn't have to hit Millie like that."

Pickle Fat frowned at his half glass of whiskey, then tossed it down like water and banged the glass on the table. "So it's Millie, is it?" He giggled. "Not the kid a-tall, or the thousand bucks."

"Yeah, it's Millie." Johnny did not touch his glass. He would not, either, until Pickle Fat noticed it. In the events of the morning he had had no breakfast. On the way out of town he had bought a pound of butter at a chain grocery store. He had eaten most of it on the road, a chunk every twenty or thirty minutes; so now there was almost a pound of butter lining his stomach. He hoped it would help.

"Millie drew my check at the plant while I was in jail and cashed it. But she wouldn't give me no money."

"She was only trying to save you, Pickle Fat."

"I knowed that. So I went without a drop for a week workin' at at the shop. But she got the Company to mail her my next check, and she wouldn't give me nothin' except I'd go with her to a doctor about my drinkin'." Pickle Fat's words were thickening. "I wasn't going to no doctor. They ain't nobody stoppin' me from drinkin'. I'm gonna die some day but it's gonna be drunk and happy."

Johnny nodded. That was the only hitch. Pickle Fat would die happy.

"I tried everything, Johnny. I watched her till I had to go to work and I watched her when I came back. I tore up the place twice and again this morning with the court hearing comin' up. Needed the money bad and not just for drinkin' neither, but I couldn't find nothin'—" Pickle Fat's words were running stuck together "—so I turned up the radio high and punched her where I knew she wouldn't pass out on me and each time I could feel her

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spine through the gut. Took me four punches before she spilled—" Pickle Fat looked at Johnny's glass. His voice went dead sober. "You ain't drinkin', Johnny."

Johnny drank the whiskey like water. It sizzled in his mouth and throat and he choked on the last of it, to Pickle Fat's amusement, but he refilled the two glasses steadily enough.

"You didn't have to beat up Millie that way, Pickle Fat."

Pickle Fat sipped his drink, eyes watchful above the rim. "When you can walk again, Johnny, you can have Millie if you want her."

"I'll be takin' care of Millie the rest of her life, Pickle Fat."

"I didn't hit her in the face, Johnny. You oughta thank me for not smashin' up her face. She's got a nice face—"

Suddenly it hit him. Pickle Fat got up, leaned against the table, then fell back.

"Johnny! Sumpin' inside—sumpin' inside a me . . . I could feel it snap, Johnny!"

Pickle Fat passed out before Johnny could hit him with the chair.

The old man and the waitress helped Johnny lay out Pickle Fat, breathing heavily, on the back seat of Johnny's car.

Johnny took his time back to the city. "Don't want no doctor fussin' over Pickle Fat," he said to himself.

Pickle Fat was dead on arrival at the city jail. The prison doctor remembered the case. This had been predictable.

"Will you notify Mrs. Routzang?" Dr. Davis smelled the whiskey on Johnny and was dubious.

"She's at City Hospital."

"What's the trouble?"

"Pickle Fat beat her up bad."

Dr. Davis called City Hospital. When he finished talking to an intern, he asked Johnny, "Are you John Barr?"

"Yes, sir."

"You brought her to the hospital this morning?"

"Yes, sir."

Dr. Davis saw it all now. He did not struggle very long with the moral problem. It was a matter of a medical confidence that he would communicate to no one—least of all, to the prosecutor's office. He had told Millie Routzang her husband would not last many drinks beyond those he had in him when he was brought to the city jail on the hit-and-run charge. Incipient diabetes . . .

"Millie Routzang died two hours ago."

Johnny sat down. He put his head in his hands. He did not cry. Tears are no measure of the punishment a man can take.

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Recommended by Anthony Boucher—

BEST MYSTERIES OF THE MONTH

The realm of "mystery-suspense" keeps staking out claims to new territory. Just as many stories published in *EQMM* could (and often do) appear in collections of notable straight fiction, so this month's first two books, both published (and priced) as "suspense," would certainly have been called straight novels in the recent past . . . unless Miss Brand caused the invention of a completely new category.

★ ★ ★ ★ **THE THREE-CORNERED HALO** *by Christianna Brand* (Scribner's, $2.95)
Inspector Cockrill's sister takes on the Mediterranean tyranny of San Juan el Pirata (scene of TOUR DE FORCE) in a wondrous comedy-fantasia of canonization, revolution, assassination, miracles, and love.

★ ★ ★ ★ **DEEP WATER** *by Patricia Highsmith* (Harper, $2.95)
The difficulties of condoning adultery and the dangers of pretending to be a murderer make Miss Highsmith's best novel yet, less sensational but even more rewarding than STRANGERS ON A TRAIN.

★ ★ ★ **COUNT THE COST** *by E. X. Ferrars* (Crime Club, $2.95)
Solid technical plotting of a detective story and sympathetic writing of human problems distinguish this British novel of numismatics, village fêtes, Monte Carlo, murder, and middle-aged jealousy.

★ ★ ★ **SOME SLIPS DON'T SHOW** *by A. A. Fair* (Morrow, $2.95)
Erle Stanley Gardner's livelier other self tells a fast, light, clever, somewhat crazy story of blackmail and kidnaping, in which Donald Lam, with inspired ingenuity, solves the wrong case.

★ ★ ★ **ROOT OF EVIL** *by James Cross* (Messner, $3)
How $80,000 in gold, lost since 1845, turns up to shatter half a dozen lives — ironic and compelling example of vigorous hard-bitten storytelling.

Outstanding recent reprints include Donald McNutt Douglass' 1956 Edgar-winning REBECCA'S PRIDE (Pocket Books, 25¢) and Ellery Queen's grand omnibus, THE HOLLYWOOD MURDERS (Lippincott, $3.50), containing THE DEVIL TO PAY (1938), THE FOUR OF HEARTS (1938) and THE ORIGIN OF EVIL (1951).

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **L. A. G. STRONG**

TITLE: ***The Birdwatcher***

TYPE: Detective Story

PROTAGONIST: Inspector Ellis McKay

LOCALE: Ullacombe, England

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *For a welcome change of pace, a full-bodied detective story in the best British tradition, with three-dimensional characterization and a wonderfully atmospheric climax.*

I DON'T BELIEVE IT EITHER, BRADDER. It just doesn't make sense. But they're dead keen at the Yard, and, I must say, they've had an uncommon strong tip that this is the place to look."

Ellis McKay rubbed at his fringe of reddish hair and looked at his old friend. When Inspector Bradstreet was puzzled, or unwilling, his homely Devon face took on an expression at which, even after years of practice, Ellis always found it hard not to burst out laughing: a look of bovine reluctance, as of a bullock confronted with a turnstile; an outward thrust of the heavy yellow mustache, a settling of the head between the solid shoulders. A wave of affection washed over Ellis, and in the warmth of it he allowed himself to grin.

The worried Inspector did not respond.

"I'd say 'twas all a mare's nest," he said slowly. "Still, if they've information like you say, *and* if they reckon 'tis big enough to send down Detective Inspector McKay—"

"Himself in person—very much at your service."

"I didn't know," Bradstreet lumbered on, "that you had to do with the Narcotics."

"Nor I do, Bradder. Nor I do. Messy work. Give me a nice clean murder, any day."

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"What do they say 'tis? Heroine?"

"And other things. Bags of it. Thousands and thousands of pounds worth."

"Here, in little Ullacombe?"

"Here in little Ullacombe. What's more, if they're right, it's been going on for years, and this doctor bloke is the man. Our tip is that it's landed somewhere in the estuary, and he picks it up and passes it on."

"Where to?"

"Ah. That's what you and I have to find out." There was a pause, in which Bradstreet followed his own line of thought. Ellis went to a map on the wall.

"If you haven't aught to do with Narcotics, why did they send you?"

"Instead of one of the real stars, eh?" Ellis grinned round at him. "A shrewd hint, Bradder."

"Now you know very well I never meant—"

"There were two reasons. First, it so happens I'm an old friend of the real doctor here. The village doctor."

"Doctor Vellacott?"

"That's the man. And he, apparently, attends O'Meara and knows him well. Also, there's a music school at Startington, and I'm to hop over and give a lecture or two in my primary capacity as a composer. What, Bradder—no protest at my putting music before crime? I'm surprised at you."

Bradstreet preferred to consider one thing at a time.

"How are you aiming to start?"

"Social call on old pal Vellacott. But, first of all, let's have a look at this map. Here's the estuary. Navigable how far up?"

Bradstreet joined him and pointed with a thick forefinger.

"Hole's Quay here—that's as far as the pleasure steamers come, and they've got to watch the tide. But a dinghy, or any boat of shallow draught, can come right up to here, save only in summertime, or when 'tis a drought."

"And Doctor O'Meara lives—?"

"Right down here. 'Tis shallowish, though, for all 'tis so wide."

"How far across to this island? Half a mile?" Bradstreet applied his thumb to the scale measure at the foot of the map.

"About a thousand yards, I reckon."

"Anything on the island?"

"Trees. 'Tis swampy, except for the high part in the middle."

"No landing stage?"

"Doctor have made a sort of a small one, but only for his own boat, when he goes to watch the birds and take pictures."

"Yes. I've heard about the bird-watching. It's perfectly genuine. He's written articles in several learned papers. And made some fine films."

"There you are, then."

Ellis turned away briskly from the map.

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"Well, if it is a mare's nest, the sooner we prove it the better. I'm off now to call on my old pal. And remember, officially I'm down here to lecture on modern music."

"Your own?" Bradstreet inquired, with an unexpected twinkle.

"Lord forbid. I've enough trouble writing it. I'll let you into a secret, Bradder. Put it down in your diary. Talk about music is all my eye. There're only two things you can do with music—play it or let it alone."

"I heard a piece of modern music once," Bradstreet said, "and t'was for all the world like someone dragging a walking stick along some railings in a parrot house."

"Did you like it, Bradder?"

The Inspector's face was cleared of all perplexity.

"No," he replied.

Dr. Rodney Vellacott had aged in the four or five years since Ellis and he last met, but he looked well, and his handclasp had lost none of its vigor. He expressed delight at the reunion, poured a couple of stiff whiskies, and wanted to know what had brought Ellis to such an out-of-the-way place.

Ellis told him about the summer school, and explained that he did not want to be resident at it.

"I'm only giving three talks, and I don't want to have to be sociable all the time in between. It means giving every hour of the day. If one's a member of the regular teaching staff, that's fine. But I'm a visitor only. So I thought I'd keep my free time to myself."

"I can't say I blame you. Weird lot they have at some of those courses. All the same, I don't see what made you come here, instead of Totnes or somewhere handier to the place."

"Birds."

"What?"

"Isn't there a bird sanctuary, or something? Isn't this the place where the chap lives who makes those marvelous films of wild birds?"

Dr. Vellacott's face cleared. "Oh, you mean O'Meara. Yes, he lives here all right. Built himself a place right down on the water. But there's no bird sanctuary. He works on his own. He's an amateur really. An enthusiast. Oh, O'Meara's a great character."

"What sort of chap is he? What's his background?"

Dr. Vellacott emptied his glass. "He ought to be dead, really. It's a wonderful story. He trained as a doctor, practised for a few years somewhere in South London, had I believe some disappointment over a girl, then went to India. He had a medical job there, threw it up, and in some way or other landed in one of the small independent states. Almost at once an epidemic broke out. O'Meara put himself in charge, bullied everyone, got things under control, and as soon as he

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could take a few moments off went and ballyragged the young Maharajah. Fair gave him hell. As a result, he was made head medical officer of the whole outfit.

"Quite ruthlessly, he proceeded to organize some sort of a health service. He did it so well that soon the Maharajah was consulting him on all manner of things, and inside a year or so O'Meara was practically running the place. He made enemies, of course, but no one dared touch him. I don't know how many years he was there—and then, one afternoon, turning a corner in his car, he was run into head-on by a lorry.

"It was a shocking smash. I don't know how he lived. He was conscious for a minute or two. He told me he sat up, recognized a bit of his right thigh-bone beside him, and threw it away. 'Shan't want *that* any more,' he said to himself. That was the last thing he remembered for weeks on end.

"The Maharajah did everything to save him. He had one of the top surgeons flown out—and flying meant something then. No expense was stinted. In all, the man's had seventeen operations—not all of them out there, of course. It was clear he couldn't stay in India; so, as soon as he was fit enough, he settled here, put up that shack of his on the waterside, and gave himself up to his hobby of watching birds. It wasn't the best thing for him, physically. He has all sorts of aches and pains, and crouching in the wet for hours on end is not what I'd recommend. But it keeps him happy, and I don't believe he's any worse than he would have been at some spa or wrapped up on the front at Eastbourne.

"There was only one thing that had me worried; and now that's pretty well taken care of. Every now and then he gets terrible attacks of panic—"

"Physical attacks, you mean?"

"Yes. With vertigo. A legacy of all he went through."

"He kept such a stiff upper lip that—?"

Dr. Vellacott nodded. "The price had to be paid somehow. These attacks last only two or three minutes in the acute stage, but I was afraid he might lose his balance and fall into the water. When they hit him, he just has to hang on to something, or sit down. But he's managed to survive.

"And then, all of a sudden, he sprang a real surprise on us. At sixty plus, he took and married a girl of twenty-eight. I admit I was sceptical about the prospects, but it's turned out marvelously well. In fact, from the moment I saw her, I felt it would. She's just right for him: calm, gentle, and steady, with lots of character under a very quiet outside. When a panic comes on, if she's within reach he calls out to her.

" 'I'm here, Francis,' she says, absolutely calm and unflurried, just

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like that. 'I'm here, Francis.' And she goes to him, striding on her long legs, and he holds on to her like a child to its mother until the fit's over."

Dr. Vallacott chuckled. "There's another thing to show you the sort she is. When he's after those birds of his, filming or just watching them, O'Meara has absolutely no sense of time. He does most of his work on an island opposite his house, too far away for her to call or ring a dinner bell when it's time for meals. In winter he's often out after dark—though what he can see beats me. So after a lot of pressure from her, he got her a powerful torch and taught her to flash to him in Morse code. She liked that, and worked away at it till now she's quite proficient, and they have long conversations with each other across half a mile of water."

"You say the dizzy attacks are better? Do you give him sedatives for them?"

Dr. Vellacott drew his head back. "I *have* prescribed for him from time to time. But he prefers to treat himself."

"Has he any other bad effects from his accident?"

"A good deal of pain, of course. And probably because of it, an occasional brainstorm."

"Taking what form?"

"Well—this is in confidence: I don't think I really ought . . . oh well, it can't do any harm. An occasional outburst of maniacal temper, when for a few seconds he'd be really dangerous if anyone was in the way."

"Tell me: in one of these fits, has he ever attacked his wife?"

"My dear Ellis!" Dr. Vellacott was a picture of professional outrage. "I couldn't possibly—"

"I ask because a friend of mine had rather a similar history, only it was a shell hit him, not a lorry. He had a hellish set of operations and never batted an eyelid. Never let himself feel. Then, like your friend, he married a young girl and woke up on his honeymoon to find himself strangling her. Once he gave emotion its head, a lot else rushed out too."

"Yes, well, one does hear of such cases, of course, and very painful they are." Dr. Vellacott shifted in his chair. "I've already said more than I should, seeing that O'Meara has been my patient."

"Past tense, eh?"

"Oh, no trouble, my boy. No tiffs. We're the best of friends."

"Well—thanks for telling me," Ellis said. "It's all most interesting. I'd like to meet him. And her. D'you think you could fix it?"

"Fix it? Of course. You've got to meet them. I'd never let you leave the place without. When would you like to go?"

"Whenever it suits them. They're not on the phone?"

"Phone? Ha! You ought to see the place. A prefab and a shed. Right on the water's edge. Very

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cosy, mind you, they've made it. I'll be seeing him tomorrow, when he comes for his stores. He always looks in for a drink and a chat."

"What did you say was the name of the Maharajah he worked for?"

"Khotanipur."

"Clever of you to remember."

"Don't forget I served a term in those parts myself. Why d'you want to know?"

"Oh, just vulgar curiosity. I was at Oxford with one, and so, like people who ask if you know their cousin in America, I always prick up my ears at a maharajah, in case he should be mine."

Three days went by before Ellis met Dr. and Mrs. O'Meara. On the third day he gave his first lecture at the music school, and, despite some pleasant contacts with the students, he saw no reason to regret having evaded the usual collection of earnest amateurs. He felt, too, that it was well to have given at least one of his lectures before visiting the O'Mearas.

The village taxi took Ellis to the head of a long, rough, so-called drive that led through some trees and across a sloping field to the water's edge. Ellis elected to walk down and give himself time to take in the details of the scene. The cottage was visible once he reached the field, its green prefabricated roof standing out acidly in the midst of a screen of dark, small trees. In front of the cottage, on its landward side, a small lawnlike space had been cleared, with three or four flower beds: and bending over one of these Ellis saw a spare, angular form which he had no trouble in deciding to be O'Meara.

As Ellis watched, the figure straightened up, the stiffness of the movement clear even at a couple of hundred yards. Dr. O'Meara stood —as if to change his gears for movement—took a couple of steps, looked up, and saw Ellis. At once he straightened up still further, and stood staring fixedly toward his visitor.

Ellis, walking into the stare, was in no way disconcerted. Sensitive to the thoughts and feelings of others, he approached the encounter with complete serenity, allowing a smile to come naturally to his face as soon as he was near enough for recognition.

No smile met him. Dr. O'Meara's scrutiny was like that of some great bird, eagle or condor, naturally fierce, but as yet seeing no cause for anger or alarm. It offered neither enmity or welcome.

Twenty years earlier, Ellis would have been intimidated. Now he advanced, holding out a hand.

"Doctor O'Meara?" he cried heartily. "My name's McKay. I believe my old friend Vellacott has spoken about me."

For a second nothing happened. Then the harsh gaze flickered and a lean hand shot out and

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took Ellis's. Its clawlike hardness strengthened the likeness to an eagle.

"He did. How do you do?"

"I'm well, thanks. And you?"

The lean shoulders hunched. "Well as I ever am."

They fell into step and walked toward the door.

"Vellacott told me you had a very bad time. I'm sorry."

"It's life, me man, it's life. If ye don't get a bad time one way, you get it another."

"I'm one of those horrible hearty people who enjoy life," Ellis told him. "But then, it's treated me well."

"Long may it go on. A fool's paradise is good while it lasts."

Rounding the corner of the house, they came on a second flower-dotted lawn, leading to a small landing stage. Ellis saw at once that the doctor had chosen the ideal spot for his incongruous home. By a trick of situation which brought the features of the landscape into a harmonious relation with one another, the view here was infinitely more attractive than from above. Straight ahead, across a wide and shining stretch of water, lay the wooded island Ellis had studied on the map at the police station, its trees flecked and spattered with autumn gold. Behind it, the far bank of the estuary undulated in soft curves, a distant patchwork of fields with high, tree-lined hedges.

Ellis turned to his host. "You have consolations here, at any rate."

"I have."

Ellis planted his feet wide apart, and scratched at his fringe of reddish hair.

"I never like to visit a place at one time of the year only. If it's a good place, I want to know it, year in and year out, in all weathers. Why do we let the way we earn our living, the sheer physical machinery of life, dominate us? Why am I not free to choose a place like this to live in for the rest of my days? You are, I know. But you're a lucky exception."

"Lucky." There was a force of angry contempt in the word. "I'd have ye know I paid a bitter price."

"I don't deny it. But some of us go on paying all our days, and still don't get what we want."

"What *do* you want?"

"Oh, I've got most of it—I'm not complaining. I'm only jealous of you, here, doing the thing you like best."

"You interested in wildfowl? Know anything about them?"

"Nothing you'd call knowledge. I spent four weeks with Adamson when he was doing his monograph on the dotterel."

"Very respectable bit of work. Mine's humbler. I watch common birds, and try to find out how they behave. These ducks, for instance. D'ye know, a wounded gull landed in here in March, and they

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looked after it? Saw me feed it, saw it was a friend of mine, and did their best for it. What sort of book d'ye find that in?"

Without waiting for an answer, Dr. O'Meara plunged into the house and poured out two whiskies. Ellis glanced round the room. Neat and small, it was redeemed from pokiness by a wide window opening on the water, and enlivened by an aquarium astir with colored fish.

The doctor followed his glance.

"Wonderful company when you're lonely." Then, seeing Ellis's brows rise, he added, "Haven't been married all that long. I had these here from the start."

Once again he subjected Ellis to a long, brooding stare. Angular almost to emaciation, he gave an impression of immense nervous energy. Such power suggested tension; yet Ellis, placidly meeting his gaze, noted that the dangling left arm was relaxed, and the hand that held the glass was perfectly steady.

"I'm going over to the island in about an hour. Like to come?"

"Shouldn't I be in the way?"

"To be frank, you would. But I can bear it."

The harshness of the words was eased by a sudden grin. Ellis shook his head.

"They know you, and they'd be scared of a stranger. No. I'll leave you to your communion with them."

The doctor accepted this without comment. He got up abruptly and opened a door.

"Eileen. Where are ye?"

A murmur came from outside, accompanied by a musical clink of china and the sound of running water. O'Meara disappeared, was heard muttering, then came back.

"My wife. She'll be only a minute."

He fell silent, and Ellis spent the interval in going to the aquarium and watching the fish. He found himself at ease in the silences that seemed to puncutate the doctor's talk, and contentedly resolved to say nothing until his host did. This policy, he saw out of the corner of his eye, puzzled the doctor, who darted sharp glances at him, and once or twice cleared his throat, but did not speak.

Then the door opened and Eileen O'Meara came in. Ellis's first impression was of grace. She was tall, and came to him with a relaxed movement rare in the white races. Only when he took her hand did he become aware that she had big bones, was built for strength rather than grace, and that she did not carry herself really well. The bony shoulders had the hint of a stoop, and the head poked forward. But grace prevailed in her smile and the deep, soft voice in which she greeted him.

The doctor began to talk of their life in the cottage, and the changes

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she had made and planned to make. He pretended to complain.

"What do ye think she wants next? Curtains. Now where's the sense of that. There's no one here to play Peeping Tom."

"Francis. I never said—"

"Windows are to see out of. What d'ye want curtains for, with a view like this?"

"Perhaps," Ellis said, grinning at her, "Mrs. O'Meara is thinking of the long dark evenings. Perhaps she doesn't like great patches of black in the walls."

She smiled back, but made no reply. Is she shy, Ellis wondered; then he saw that she was perfectly serene. Her peace continued when the doctor fell abruptly silent. Smiling faintly, she made no effort to speak.

Ellis took charge. "What turned your mind to birdwatching?" he asked O'Meara. "Or were you always interested?"

"Always. Then, when I was a student, I worked under a man called Patten."

"Not Charlie Patten? Professor of Anatomy at Sheffield?"

"That's the man." O'Meara stared belligerently, as if Ellis were trying to steal his property. "Did you know him?"

"He was a distant connection of mine. A cousin, quite a bit removed."

"He was an Irishman," said O'Meara, as if that disposed of Ellis's claim.

"I'm Irish, on my mother's side."

"McKay's a Scottish name."

"My father's."

"Scottish and Irish. What a God-awful mixture."

Eileen O'Meara looked up. "Francis!" she protested softly.

"The fella can't help it," O'Meara grunted. "Well, as I was saying, I worked under Patten, and he put me on the right road. He'd an arrangement with Trinity House that gave him the run of all the lighthouses."

"Lighthouses, Francis?" Obviously she had not heard this story. Ellis expected him to show impatience, but he gave her a half smile.

"All sorts of birds flock to the light and dash themselves against it. Charlie Patten offered rewards for any rare bird found on the balcony-thing—the gallery round the light. Taught all the crews to recognize 'em. Taught 'em to sing Handel, too." He gave a bark of laughter. "Great man. I was with him when he found an avocet. Great rarity in those days. He was off his head with joy."

"Did you by any chance meet another of his pupils whom he initiated?" Ellis mentioned a well-known Irish name.

"At his home, once or twice. Why?"

"He was in my line of business. Threw up medicine for it. Went to pieces, poor chap. Drink and drugs."

O'Meara glared and stiffened.

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"Hark at this smug fella here! Let me give ye an elementary lesson. Drink and drugs don't send a man to pieces. He's on his way before he touches them. Very often they're all that holds him together. Ah, man, ye don't know a thing about it! Sitting there, smug and confident, laying down the law. Look at me, man. I drink. I take drugs. Am I in pieces? God help the man that believes it, and tries to take advantage. That's all I've to say."

"Francis, Francis, don't excite yourself now."

"Ah, no, pet, I'm sorry, but this fella here, with his 'drink and drugs.' Do ye know, Mister Bloody McKay, half Irish, half Scotch—do ye know *why* I take both drink *and* drugs? Because half my time I'm in pain, and they ease it. Put that in your pipe and blow bubbles."

"That's a perfectly sound and legitimate reason. But—"

"Oho. His lordship bestows approval. Or lightens his disapproval. D'ye hear, pet? I may drink and drug—in moderation."

"But," Ellis went on unperturbed, "you have medicinal knowledge and the good sense to be guided by it. You use these things rightly. The vast majority don't."

"And how the hell do *you* know what the vast majority do or don't do? *What* do you know about this business, anyway?"

Ellis faced him squarely. "You'd be surprised how much I know."

He said it so simply, with all the weight of his personality behind it, that O'Meara paused, eyed him, and abruptly changed his mood.

"Yes, well, here are we chinwagging when I ought to be getting ready to go out. You know, pet, I don't dislike this fella. Yes," he looked at Ellis, "you're a man I can talk to. You look damn funny, though. Like a ginger cockatoo."

"Francis!" his wife protested. He stretched out a hand, and patted hers.

"Ah, be easy, pet! If he's the man I take him for, he'll appreciate the justice of the comparison."

"I do indeed," Ellis answered him. "I see what you mean each time I look in the mirror."

"But Francis dear, how would you like it if—"

"If he did the same by me? Well, go ahead, McKay. What do I look like?"

"Keeping to the same order of creation," Ellis said, surveying him critically, "I'd say an embittered old kestrel."

"Good. Good. Shake on it." They shook. O'Meara stood upright, grimacing for an instant with pain. "Tell you what: You shall come out with me next time Eileen does. I take her out every now and then. Suit you?"

"Fine—so long as the time doesn't clash with my lectures."

"To hell with your lectures."

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"Amen. Still, they're what I'm paid for," Ellis said, with a grin.

"Well, we'll fix it up. You know, pet, I'm starting to like this fella. Do you like him? She won't answer," he told Ellis, "but I can see she does. Well, be good to yourself, now."

On leaving the O'Mearas Ellis went to the station telephone and set in motion various pieces of official machinery. Then, he went off more or less cheerfully to spend another day at Startington. With his power of giving himself immediately to what he was doing, he managed for hours at a time to forget his official mission and be a musician intent upon his art and the communication of its mysteries to others.

The following day he had another conference with Bradstreet.

"Any news?" the Inspector asked him placidly.

"Quite a bit, Bradder. I'm beginning to be afraid it mayn't be a mare's nest after all."

"Took a liking to them, have you? Can't say I blame you. All the same, if so be . . ."

"That's just it, Bradder. If so be . . . and it just might so be. What have you got?"

"'Tis all according. I mean, it may fit in, or it may be naught after all. Let's have yours first."

"Right. First of all, he sends his films off to be developed at a place in Ealing. We're checking on the place and all to do with it. The films go in a sort of large tin chest, not like the normal flat boxes —so there could be room for other things besides the film. More significant, perhaps—but again perhaps nothing to the purpose—the Maharajah has fallen on bad times, and is damned hard up. So that a devoted and loyal friend who owed his life to him, or thought he did, might be uncommonly useful in acting as agent and selling large quantities of valuable goods."

"Very true."

"Now, if those goods could be landed in a highly unlikely place where no one would think of looking, a place far beyond the range of the ordinary seagoing craft—*and* if anyone had regular and unquestionable reasons for going to that place, openly and aboveboard, and had been doing so for years—*and* had a perfectly good means of getting the said goods away to London, where they could be divided up and distributed—well, we *might* be on to something."

"That's right," asserted Bradstreet equably. "It all fits in according."

"Now tell us, Bradder of the comely pow, what have *you* got?"

"Eh? What did you call me?"

"Never mind. Quotation from Ralph Hodgson. Wholly complimentary." Ellis did not tell Bradstreet it came from a poem called *The Bull*.

"Oh. Well. Be that as it may.

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I've traced the last four times the doctor sent off his films to be developed. Two was just after spring tides . . ."

"When a bigger boat than usual could come up the river?"

"Ah. At the highest tides in the month the water comes right up to the road down there by the rectory. I reckon it's another foot or eighteen inches if the wind's helping."

"So a sizeable boat could slip up and leave something on the island?"

"Or anywhere else they were minded to. The other times—one was after a two-day's fog, and the others was nothing special."

Ellis rubbed his red fringe of hair. "It *could* add up, Bradder, couldn't it?" He grinned. "You know, this is the danger point in a case. You make up your mind in a certain direction, and at once almost everything you find seems to support it. It's the time to be careful, Bradder. I've led myself up the garden path that way more than once. Remember that chap Wellingborough and the three widows?"

"Ah. All the same, I'll lay anyone would have made the same mistake."

"Generous of you, Bradder. You have a sweet nature."

"Never mind my nature," rejoined his colleague equably. "'Tis the doctor's nature we're concerned with. Just because things seem to be fitting in, like, is no reason not to look at 'em. We shan't go far wrong if we act like there *was* something going on, and the doctor was at the back of it."

"Fine. Hypothesis, hokey-pokey, and the doctor responsible. Very well. What—in view of the fact that, being nobody's fool, the said doctor is probably as suspicious as hell of us—what, O Bradder, is the next practicable step? What can two poor innocent little policemen do?"

Bradstreet shook his head, like a bull shaking away a fly.

"We can watch the island."

"From where?"

"I don't reckon 'twould be on this side, if they landed anything."

"Why not? Don't forget they could signal to his cottage. If anyone saw, they'd think it was O'Meara and his wife talking."

"Ah. But the water's deeper on the far side, and there's less chance of being seen."

"Even so—" Ellis suddenly smote his forehead. "What a fool I am! Where are his birds? Where does he film them?"

Bradstreet stared. "Mostly, I believe, in the little bay facing the river mouth. Why?"

"Because if strangers came barging in at three in the morning to land things, they'd scare the birds stiff. He'd never allow that. Depend on it, any landing is done on the far side."

Bradstreet grunted. The reason-

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ing seemed to him, like the premises, exotic.

"One final thing, Bradder. Why has it got to be the doctor? If anything's going on, why can't it be any other of the inhabitants?"

Bradstreet blew out his mustache. Here he was on sure ground.

"There's five hundred and thirty-four inhabitants, as you call 'em, and we know the whole lot inside out. No one else it could be."

The promised boat trip was not long delayed. The morning after his next lecture Ellis found a note inviting him to go over after lunch. The weather had turned somewhat, and a stiff breeze decided him to take an old leather jacket he had often found useful on night vigils and other occasions when a man in his profession has to keep still for long periods out of doors.

Dr. O'Meara, himself clad in a filthy old duffle coat, eyed the garment with a grunt.

"We've a coat for you here." From a little glass-covered porch he produced the fellow of his own coat. "Better take it. May be chilly."

Eileen O'Meara appeared at the last moment, clad in yet a third, which hung open to show a pleasant light-blue sweater. Her long legs were thrust into heavy tweed trousers, spotted here and there with fish scales. The whole effect was incongruous, but, to Ellis, most attractive.

The boat, oddly named *Bunt*, came under no classification known to Ellis. Originally, it must have been a rowboat; but the forward thwart had been reinforced with a solid wooden block, in which was set a short, stout mast. Up this, his hands moving with extraordinary agility, the doctor ran a sail with a long boom which reached into and over the stern seats. Ellis, a complete ignoramus on such matters, looked for some means of controlling this, but saw only a length of thin rope attached to the end of the boom which would check the extent of the swing.

With a nod, the doctor directed his wife to one of the seats at the side, and, after a swift appraising glance, sent Ellis to the other.

"I wondered," Ellis said, "if you'd put me on one side to balance the two of you."

"Eileen's heavier than you'd think. Got big bones."

He shoved off hard and took the tiller. The boat glided over the few yards of sheltered water, then heeled over as the wind took the sail. Ellis found himself lifted, and realized why the doctor had placed him where he was.

In the stern, under the seats, were two large japanned metal boxes which, Ellis guessed, held the cinecamera and other apparatus. Feeling the doctor's eye on him, he gave them no more than a glance.

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The boat ran fast toward the island. No one spoke till they were close to the wooded shore. Then, with a sudden movement of the tiller, the doctor changed course. Ellis just had time to duck before the boom swung across his head. He looked up, to see the doctor's grin.

"Sorry. But you're quicker than Eillen. I'm always telling her that one of these days she'll be getting her block knocked off."

She smiled. "I go into a dream, and forget."

Another few seconds, and the boat slipped into a tiny sheltered bay. Expertly using the momentum, the doctor brought the craft to the shore. Eileen roused herself, climbed into the bow, and made fast to the root of a tree.

"I'll be leaving you now for a bit," the doctor said. "I've a job to do."

He clambered stiffly past them, fished out one of the metal boxes, and took the camera from it. Ellis watched innocently. There was plenty of room in the box for more than the camera.

It seemed very still after the doctor had gone. The bay was a perfect miniature, with a few yards of white sand, a ridge of gray fissured rock, and then the wavering slender stems of silver birches. Eileen O'Meara did not speak, and Ellis was silent too. Outside and above, they could hear the waves and the wind in the trees.

Suddenly aware, Ellis looked full at her, and found her gaze turned on him. She had her husband's trick of steady scrutiny, but without any of his fierceness. Hers was a gentle, candid search. Ellis emptied his mind. Nothing but honesty could save him now. He smiled into her eyes, and saw her decide that he would tell the truth.

"You are a detective, aren't you?"

"Yes."

"Watching us?"

"Yes. If only to make sure that you have nothing to do with what I am looking for."

"What are you looking for?"

"That I ought not to tell you. Shall we say that there are ideas afoot that—well—something is going on?"

She nodded thoughtfully.

"Yes," she said, as if to herself. "I have thought that too, sometimes." Her gaze came back to him. "Don't you find it difficult to accept people's hospitality, and come to their homes as a friend, when really you mean to—to—"

"See if they are keeping the law? No." Deliberately, Ellis crossed one thigh over the other. "I look at my job like this. The state enacts certain laws, with the broad view of making life safer for the majority of us. To be members of the state, to accept its protection and its benefits, entails accepting those laws. Some of them involve issues of right and wrong so obvious that

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we all agree about them. Others are open to doubt, or just plum silly. Even so, in loyalty to the state we are prepared to accept them, just as in loyalty to an individual we put up with his various faults and foibles. Well, the state pays me to see that its more important laws are kept, or the breakers are called to account. I owe my loyalty, if you like, to an abstraction. Your husband doesn't think like that—nor do you. His loyalty is given to individuals. Where we agree is in the importance of loyalty."

Characteristically, she made no direct comment on this. Her soft eyes shone.

"I would do anything for Francis," she said.

"Almost anything."

"No. Anything at all."

"But for which Francis? There are two."

"For me, there's only one." Just as he thought they had reached an impasse, she went on, "You are thinking of his attacks, when he is terrified and furious. But they are a part of what has happened to him, a part of all his suffering, and so a part of him. No, Mr. McKay, there is only one Francis."

Ellis tried again.

"Right. Then, if Francis should, in loyalty to an individual, become mixed up in something which neither the undamaged part of him, nor you as a human being, could possibly think right, your first wish would be to save him from the results of it?"

She smiled, and shook her head.

"You don't understand. If anyone who commanded his devotion wanted a thing done, Francis would accept it unquestioningly. He'd think it was all right because that person wanted it."

"But, surely, there are some things . . . If his friend wanted a collection of fresh human heads, for instance?"

"Francis would tell himself that a lot of people deserved killing anyway."

"You make him out to be a very dangerous man, Mrs. O'Meara."

"Perhaps he is."

Looking at her, his lower lip thrust out, Ellis took a chance.

"What I'm afraid of isn't as simple as straightforward murder. Yet in a sense it's worse."

"Worse?" she asked. "What could be worse?"

"Psychic murder. Spiritual murder. Things which hurt the soul."

For an instant she looked puzzled. Then she gave him a smile of gentle amusement.

"I see. That is why you maneuvered the conversation so clumsily towards drugs the other day. You are a very unsubtle man, Mr. McKay."

"Don't for heaven's sake get that idea into your head. I'm very dangerous indeed. In my way, I'm just as dangerous as your husband."

She inspected him thoughtfully.

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"Well—perhaps, in some ways, you might be."

There was a long silence, in which the sounds of wind and water filled their world. Gleams of autumn sun filtered into the little bay, intensifying Ellis's feeling that the hour was, like the place, an oasis of quiet—perhaps the last—in a strange history.

Then Eileen began, in a quite natural voice, to ask him questions about Startington; and when the doctor returned, it was to find them talking easily, and Ellis trailing a hand in the water . . .

After that, there was nothing to do but watch and wait. The watching was made difficult by the doctor's friends, the waterfowl. Anything unexpected at any hour of the day or night was excuse for them to set up an outcry; and Ellis knew that the doctor's ear would be acute to recognize any note of disturbance, and draw his own conclusions. As long as the visibility was good, watch could be kept from a distance; but the short evenings and the moonless nights offered all sorts of problems.

Luckily, they had not long to wait until the next high tide. Ellis took no chances. Local men, who knew the estuary inside out, were placed in good positions, and every stir of the doctor was timed and noted. Ellis, his work at Startington done, paid further visits there on the pretext of meeting a distinguished Belgian composer, and came back to Ullacombe each evening.

Then the weather really broke, in a scurry of wind and rain. Ellis got back from the music school later than usual, having attended an evening concert, to be met with the news that soon after dark a fast motorboat had come up the estuary. The boat carried no lights, but those aboard obviously knew their way, and a flash or two from a torch—no more— suggested that she had landed on the island on the far side from the doctor's house.

Cursing, Ellis accepted an oilskin and sou'wester and joined Bradstreet and his colleagues on board a police motorboat. The noise of wind and rain more than drowned the sound of the engine, as the boat glided cautiously to a spot under the lee of the island from which they could see—if anyone or anything could see—any boat that attempted to enter the little bay.

Ellis took a further risk. The men hidden all round the doctor's house had portable radios with which they could report any movement. It was a hundred to one against the doctor's having any radio equipment.

Though they were out of the wind, the next couple of hours were wet, cold, and grim. The boat offered little cover from the rain, and, even in the comparatively

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sheltered water, they wallowed disquietingly. A further irritation was that, with the possible exception of Bradstreet, who for Ellis's sake expressed a benign optimism, the local men were frankly sceptical. Any awe they might have felt toward Scotland Yard was dissolved by rain and chill discomfort.

Then, sharply, suddenly, the radio sputtered to life. The sergeant watching it answered, and his voice took on a new note. He shuffled along to Bradstreet.

"Carstairs reporting, sir. The doctor's boat have just put out, with two aboard."

"*Two* aboard," Ellis said. "Damn! That means his wife's with him.

"Well," Bradstreet replied, "She'd have to be in it, like, wouldn't she?"

"Maybe, Bradder, maybe. But I'd hoped—I'd very much hoped—she wasn't."

"I mean—'tis the oars, tonight. He wouldn't put up no sail in this."

Bradstreet was wrong—though they did not immediately discern it. Watching and listening, his whole frame a strained focus of attention, Ellis could not be sure just when it was that the doctor's boat came round into the shelter of the small lagoon. A general agreement of his senses told him it was there, and a sudden alert stiffening of Bradstreet's mass beside him suggested that he was aware of it too. Then, in a lull, came unmistakable sounds: a keel grinding, and, sudden and furious as the bark of a dog, the doctor's voice.

"Sit tight, all hands," Ellis breathed, "till he's got the stuff aboard."

He said it to himself, since all instructions had of course been given before they set out; then he tensed his muscles for the hardest wait of all. The doctor was a long time finding whatever he was looking for, and an intensification of the wind, which made hearing impossible, led Ellis to fear that he had got away unobserved. Then, again without warning, sharp alien sounds pierced the soft crashing of the boughs and the slapping of water, and in a brief lessening of the murk Ellis saw the indistinct shadow of the boat, well clear of the point, and with, of all mad things, its sail.

"After him!"

The engine sprang into action, the propeller gripped the water, and a strong headlight threw an amorphous butter-colored blur across which thin rods of driving rain gleamed and slanted.

"Damn that there light!" roared Bradstreet. "I can't see nothing."

Then, like a ghost, the doctor's boat skittered ahead, its sail dipping insanely to one side. What happened next remained vague in all but speed. The sail straightened for a moment, and the stern of the

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boat became a shape. Something fell sideways from it, and the fangs of the water showed in a splash. The sail lurched drunkenly, and Ellis lost sight of it. One of the men cried out, and pointed to the water just ahead. Bradstreet shouted, the engines checked, the police boat swung in a tight arc, and arms were reaching over the side.

"Bring that bloody light round," Bradstreet roared. "Ah. Got her!"

With the feeling that his eyes were bulging from his head, Ellis saw them lift aboard the dripping form of Eileen O'Meara. Bradstreet kneeled at her side and turned his torch on her face. Horrified, they saw a great oozing wound on her left temple.

Ellis recovered first. "Get after him, before he has time to throw the stuff overboard."

They were a full minute picking him up in the searchlight, and, as they came near, they saw his oilskin gleaming as he heaved something over the side. Then they were level, and the two boats were grappled, dancing stiffly and irregularly side by side.

The mind acts oddly in moments of strain. Ellis often wondered afterward what impelled his first words to the glistening, furious O'Meara.

"You threw something overboard," he yelled above the din. "What was it?"

The light flashed on O'Meara's teeth. "If you want to know, fish it up."

"I will," Ellis told him, "if I have to drag the river for a year."

What had been happening on board the *Bunt* they did not learn till later. O'Meara had been tense all the afternoon and evening, brooding within himself, and snapping at Eileen if she spoke. This was common form at times, and she took no particular notice. But when, without warning, soon after ten o'clock he told her he was going out to the island and asked her to come with him, she dug her heels in.

"At this time of night, Francis? In this weather? You must be mad."

He glowered. "I'm going, whether you come or not. I mayn't get back. Singlehanded, I don't think I will. Still, that's your lookout."

He went into the porch, and she heard him putting on his oilskin. She followed, and caught at his arm.

"But, Francis, why? What can you possibly see on a night like this?"

He shook off her hand, and stumped out. She hesitated, then, with a despairing sigh, unhooked her own oilskin and went after him.

He had often boasted that he knew the estuary better than any of the local fishermen. In the next

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ten minutes he proved it. No one else would have dared to hoist a sail in such weather, but the *Bunt*, broad and high at the sides, skated over the broken water like a skimming stone, and was soon in the lee of the island.

Francis often landed at this spot, so that Eileen could have believed, up to the last, that he was urged on by some demon of mad daring or, threatened by an inner crisis, repeating a habitual action. Only when he came grunting back, and deposited a package under the thwart, did certainty rise in her mind.

"Francis. What are you doing?"

There was a new note in her voice. Even the preoccupied man heard it.

"Never you mind. Hold on. There's one more."

She had a torch in her pocket. She switched it on to see what he had brought. Furiously he yelled at her to put the light out. When he came back, she was resolute.

"Francis. What is all this? I insist on knowing."

"Shut up."

"I won't help, unless you tell me."

There was a black pause. "Something for Kumar. Wait till we get back."

A minute later they were away. As the wind started to catch them, and the *Bunt* to go with it, an unearthly light filled the little bay, and noise sprang up behind them. O'Meara, cursing frantically, began scrabbling under the thwart.

"Francis! Give it up to them. They know."

He was wrestling to free a line with a stone for weight and a tiny buoy, hoping to have time to fix it to his packages, drop them overboard, and find them again when the pursuit had died down. Suddenly he saw her rise, first to her knees, then to full height. She had one of the boxes in her arms.

"Put that down."

For answer, she dropped it overboard. Uttering a scream of rage, he stumbled toward her and lashed out with the stone in his hand. Swung on the end of eighteen inches of thick twine, it caught her on the side of the head and knocked her overboard.

They were in the bedroom in O'Meara's cottage. Eileen lay on the bed. She was breathing, but only just. Dr. Vellacott was bent over her, fixing a temporary bandage on her temple. Close behind them, a policeman on either side, sat O'Meara.

"It was the boom, I tell you," he repeated. "When your crew of bloody idiots turned on that light, she looked round, the wind took the sail, and the boom knocked her overboard."

"Dr. Vellacott."

The doctor glanced up.

"Which way was she facing when she got the wound?"

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Dr. Vellacott turned back to his work. He cleared his throat, and took his time about answering.

"It looks as if she was facing whatever struck her."

Ellis turned to O'Meara. "You said she was looking astern, at our searchlight."

"Well? She must have heard me shout, and turned her head, too late to duck."

"How is she, Dr. Vellacott? Any hope of her recovering consciousness?"

"There's just the possibility. I don't think it'll help if she does." He went into technicalities. "With that brain injury, she certainly won't be able to speak, and she'll almost certainly be paralyzed. O'Meara will confirm that, I think."

"If she did speak," O'Meara put in, "it wouldn't be to the purpose."

Ellis looked at him hard. He had shown no sign of feeling, no emotion but anger, and now his face was set in an aquiline rigidity that made its wrinkles and creases look like gashes cut with a chisel.

Shrugging unhappily, Ellis transferred his gaze to the girl in the bed. Suddenly the gaze became a stare, and the skin crept on his spine. The two last fingers of her left hand were moving faintly, in a broken rhythm.

In a whisper that seemed to tear his throat, Ellis spoke.

"The torch! Give her the torch!"

He heard a furious oath from O'Meara, and the sudden movement of the men on either side as they laid hands on him; but his eyes never left those feebly moving fingers.

Bradstreet put the torch in her hand. For a moment her fingers stopped and Ellis's own breathing with them. Then, with increased purpose, the fingers fumbled for the torch's button.

No man there will ever forget what followed. It seemed at first the fingers had not strength to press the button. Then the light flickered in the bulb and, slowly, feebly, in flashes that stammered and faltered, yet held on to their purpose, words took shape.

"I . . . I'm here . . . Francis . . ."

A great knot swelled in Ellis's throat, and the flashes glimmered in his tears. Suddenly there sounded from behind him a terrible cry.

"Oh, God, oh, my God, what have I done, my pet, my darling!"

The men holding O'Meara let go and he stumbled to the bedside and flung himself on his knees beside his wife.

The others stood back, and left him so—until the last flicker faded and the fingers stirred no more . . .

He made no resistance after that, but told them everything. The maharajah had got into difficulties,

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and when O'Meara had said from his heart that he wished he could help the maharajah, had suggested a possible way. O'Meara, who would have done practically anything for his one-time benefactor, found no scruple to prevent him, or, if he did, angrily suppressed it after his usual fashion—by attacking the world that judged such things immoral.

"I got the wind up when you chaps came nosing about. I couldn't put the others off without you knowing—they'd land the stuff anyhow; and I reckoned the only thing was to get it at once and put it where you wouldn't be likely to find it." He jerked his hand toward the bed. "I never meant to hurt her. I'd have given my life for her."

"I believe that," Ellis told him. "But you gave me a very bad jolt. I remembered your making a play about her and the boom when I was with you. For a ghastly moment or two I wondered if you'd planned it."

O'Meara shook his head. "Pure chance. She was careless about it. And now—"

"One thing more. Your contacts. The people who bring the stuff in."

"That you'll have to find out for yourselves."

"Even now that you know what she thought about it?"

O'Meara shook his head. "They trusted me. What are you worrying about? It shouldn't be beyond your wit to find them." He looked up, and his face had changed.

"And now, gentlemen, before we go, I would like to retire to the bathroom. And I ask you, in the name of human dignity, to let me go alone."

Ellis looked into his eyes, and nodded.

O'Meara got up, very stiffly, and shuffled out of the door. Bradstreet grabbed Ellis's arm.

"Quick. He'll—"

"Let him be," Ellis said, with something of O'Meara's rage. "Why drag it out? He's had enough, and more."

For a couple of minutes there was silence. Ellis took out his old turnip watch, looked at it, and kept still for a whole minute or more. Then he motioned Bradstreet and the sergeant to go into what they all knew they would find.

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **MARVIN ROSSMAN**

TITLE: ***The Man Who Cut Off His Nose***

TYPE: Crime Story

LOCALE: Brooklyn, New York

TIME: About 30 years ago

COMMENTS: *Do you remember the street-corner pitchmen of the big cities? What a breed of con-men they were! A nostalgic memoir of a vanished American who had the true gift of gab . . .*

BACK IN MY YOUTH—BEFORE TV and radio—when air-conditioned movies were unknown and automobiles were still a luxury—on hot nights like this people strolled the streets and, for entertainment, stopped to listen to the street-corner pitchman. There is one I can never forget.

I was loafing on Powell Street near busy Pitkin Avenue in that section of Brooklyn called Brownsville. A car with two men drove up. The passenger stepped out and unloaded two heavy black suitcases.

He said, "See you later, Mac!" to the driver, who rode off.

The man looked around and spied me.

"Hey, kid, how old are you?"

"Sixteen. Why?" I lied by only one year.

"You look fourteen. Want to make a couple of bucks?"

"Sure."

"Here's two bucks—one bill, the rest in change. Now, here's what you do. I'm going to make a medicine pitch. You buy the first bottle for fifty cents. I'll give you back the bottle and the money. I'll sell the next bottle for a dollar. You start the buying again. Same deal—I'll give both back to you. The third time, I'll sell it for two dollars. You start it off again, and I give you your money back with the bottle. That's all there is to it. Think you can handle it?"

I felt uneasy and I guess I looked it. The man was an odd one. He

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was of medium height, slight in build. His hands and feet were extremely small. His face came to a sharp point at the nose, making me think of a woodpecker. The slant of his nose and the slant of his forehead were almost a straight, continuous line. The distance from the tip of his nose to his mouth was enormous, with the mouth drawn backward and inward on an almost chinless face. A shock of reddish hair pointed straight up. A red-headed woodpecker.

"Yeah. But is this gonna get me in any trouble, Mister?"

He smiled. The smile was reassuring. His eyes crinkled and he looked silly but friendly. Clownish. If this guy was in vaudeville you would laugh the minute he walked on stage.

"Don't worry, kid," and to the cop on the beat who happened to be walking by, he added, "Hi pal, how's tricks?"

"Hi, Needell."

The cop gave him a friendly wink and walked on. I decided then that the man must be okay.

"I'll do it, Mr. Needell," I said.

"Smart kid. You caught my name right off. I think you'll do fine."

Needell rehearsed me for a few minutes. Then he opened one of the suitcases and turned it into a small platform complete with collapsible legs. He up-ended the other suitcase and opened it from the side. It contained a lot of half-pint bottles filled with dark liquid.

He pulled a large white handkerchief from his pocket and tucked it into his collar so that it spread across his chest. From an inside pocket he drew a long glittering knife like the one we had at home to slice meat. The blade must have been at least ten inches long.

Nonchalantly, Needell tested the sharpness of the blade on the ball of his thumb. Then he pulled a hair from his head and cut through the red strand gracefully. He was in a good light from a barber shop window.

A few people on Pitkin Avenue stopped to watch. Those walking behind them stopped, too. They recognized that a pitch was coming and paused to see the fun.

"Ladies and gentlemen!" Needell bellowed. Leather lungs were essential to a pitchman. We didn't have loudspeakers in those days, either.

"Gather round! Step right up and gather round! For tonight I am going to cut off my nose!"

He gave the crowd his clown's grin and they all laughed. More people joined the group.

"You think I am joking, ladies and gentlemen, but let me assure you I am absolutely serious—absolutely!" Again the foolish grin, and again the crowd grew larger.

Needell grabbed the end of his nose and jabbed dangerously at it with the knife. A woman gasped.

"What's in a nose? A nose by any

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other name would smell as sweet. Who said that? Shakespeare? No. Me! I said it and I'm glad I said it. Want to know why? Because what good is a nose like this? I get into trouble going through revolving doors."

The patter continued until the crowd reached traffic-stopping proportions. Needell kept urging them to come in closer. I could feel the people pressing behind me.

"Anybody here think I am going to cut off my nose for free? No? That's what I thought. I know when I am talking to intelligent people. No, before I cut off my nose, I want to see if I have any gamblers in this audience. Now I'm not gonna tell you that I have a medicine to cure scrambled brains, crow's-feet, gallstones, kidneystones, corns, bunions, and onions. No sir, not me! I have something in a bottle that won't do a blessed thing for you. For all you know it's just licorice water. Smell that, son—smells like licorice, don't it?"

I said, "Yes, sir."

"Now, all I'm askin' is that somebody offer five dollars for this bottle. I don't guarantee that it will do anything for you at all. Now, I *could* say that it will bring back the faded color in your cheeks, but I won't. All I'll say is that after this bottle is sold to some sport willing to risk five dollars, I am going to cut off my nose right before your very eyes."

Some people snickered. A few on the edge of the crowd walked away. But nobody made an offer.

"All right, then—two-fifty. Will someone give two-fifty to get a bottle of *Bloom of Youth Elixir* and see me cut off my nose? Nobody? Two? One? One dollar. Is it worth one measly dollar for not only the bottle and its contents but also to see me cut off my nose right here? Fifty cents? Surely it's worth fifty cents! After all, I can't run off with a mob like this around me!"

"I'll take a bottle," I said.

"Me, too," said a man smoking a cigar, "and let's see you do it!"

Three others passed up the money.

"Now, gentlemen—and ladies—did you really think I was going to cut off my nose for a mere fifty cents apiece? Tell you what I'm going to do. I will give you five gentlemen your fifty cents back. No, I don't want the bottles of *Bloom of Youth Elixir*. You can keep them as tokens of my good will. What do you say to that? It pays to take a gamble, doesn't it? *Now* let us see who will offer a dollar to see me cut off my nose—and get a bottle of the *Elixir* as a bonus. Any gamblers?"

I started it. Each of those who got his money back handed up a dollar too. Again Needell handed out five bottles, and again he returned the money to each of us who held a bottle.

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The people were beginning to feel ridiculous. They laughed at each other in a helpless sort of way. Those with bottles of the *Elixir* waved them gaily. One man took a swig and yelled "Wow!"

"What is it?"

"Licorice water—just like the man said!"

A pretty girl got the giggles. Needell looked happier and sillier than ever. He made reckless flourishes around his nose with the knife.

"I am not going to waste any more time. I will soon sever the proboscis from the physiognomy—just as soon as I have placed all the bottles of wonderful *Bloom of Youth Elixir* in the hands of enough worthy people. This is cheap as bettin' on the horses—and a lot safer!"

My two dollars went up first. About twenty more followed.

"Still some bottles left," said Needell wheedlingly.

"Come on," said one man, who had already given his money. "He can't get away from us. Let's call his bluff!"

A forest of bills went up to the platform. Needell had at least fifty of those bottles in the suitcase, maybe more. In a few minutes the suitcase was empty.

"Step back now, ladies and gentlemen, it might splatter."

He twirled the knife and sliced the air so close to his nose that people up front cringed a little.

But he didn't cut off his nose just yet. He joked a while and threatened. The people were getting impatient.

"Don't worry," he soothed. "If I don't cut off my nose, you'll all get your money back."

He was still clowning around when a car with the horn on drowned him out. It plowed up to the audience. A big man in a gray suit and snap-brim felt hat leaped out. He flashed a silver badge from inside his lapel so that all could see.

"Okay, Needell. We got you this time."

"But wait! I have their money!"

"Never mind that! Come along," and to the crowd, "This man is a faker. I'm taking him down to headquarters."

He shoved Needell into the car and threw the suitcases in after him. Then he climbed behind the wheel.

The crowd milled noisily around the car.

"Needell!" I called. "You crook, you got my two dollars!" But nobody paid any attention to me. A big bruiser nudged me aside, nearly knocking me flat in his eagerness to get closer to the car.

"Hey, he's got our money!" cried several others.

"Come down to the station house and bring those bottles with you. They're evidence!" the detective called back.

The police station was six blocks

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away. As the car started off, the crowd broke and most of them headed for the station house. Those with bottles ran quickest.

I didn't bother. I had recognized the car as the same one Needell had arrived in. Mr. Silver Badge was his driver—the man Needell had called "Mac."

Two minutes later the cop on the beat came along and ordered the crowd to "break it up."

I approached him red-faced.

"Your friend Needell is a crook, officer."

"Yeah? How do you know?"

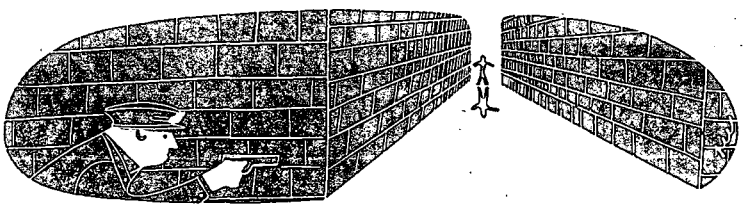
I told him.

He took the bottle from me and read the label.

"Bloom of Youth Elixir. Guaranteed to Put Color in Your Cheeks."

He winked. "Your face is nice and red, ain't it?"

Dang cops anyway. Never around when you need them!



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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **WALTER J. WINN**

TITLE: ***An Old Japanese Custom***

TYPE: Detective-Crime Story

DETECTIVE: Suzuki

LOCALE: Kobe, Japan

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *In Japan, a foreign criminal is at a great disadvantage. He does not know the rules of living in Japan. He stumbles over obstacles a Japanese would avoid automatically.*

SUZUKI AND I HAD CONSUMED BEER for an hour. The Tokyo evening was warm and it was good to sit and talk of old times, of occupation days, and of the funny things that happen when people live in a strange country.

We were seated on the floor in a small restaurant. Like all Japanese rooms this one was simply furnished, tasteful and clean.

Suddenly everything in it began to quiver. The floor beneath us trembled and the sliding doors rattled nervously in their grooves.

"An earthquake," Suzuki said.

I nodded, smiling to show that I was not concerned. The trembling stopped.

"A small one," he added with relief in his voice.

Every Japanese is afraid of earthquakes. Foreigners in the Orient sometimes go through them calmly, but only because they do not know the terrible things a big one can do. The Japanese know.

Suzuki recovered by drinking half a glass of beer. He was slender and a little tall for a Japanese, with a pleasant face and shrewd eyes. Sometimes they lit up with mischief when he talked of his work. Suzuki was a police official.

"That tremor recalls something to mind," he said in his slightly literary English. "Forgive me for speaking of it, but my duties sometimes force me to investigate the misdeeds of foreigners."

"Even a foreigner can commit a crime," I said, smiling.

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"That is true. When he does, I am angry. But I am also a little sorry for the criminal because he is at a disadvantage in our country. He does not know the rules of life in Japan. His cleverness does him no good and he stumbles over obstacles a Japanese would avoid automatically. And thus he is very easy to catch."

"What has all this to do with an earthquake?" I asked.

"Have you ever heard of Mr. Charles Collins?"

"An Australian, or maybe an American, who got into trouble in Kobe a few years ago?"

"An American," Suzuki said apologetically. "I was fortuitously present when he was apprehended. Were it not for an earthquake Mr. Collins might never have committed his crime. And were it not for the same earthquake—but I spoil my story if I do not commence at the beginning. Mr. Collins, you will recall, resided in the hills above Kobe . . ."

I listened to Suzuki tell his story, and it was an odd one. But I must relate it here in my own words. I cannot hope to reproduce my friend's rather old-fashioned speech, and it would be dull reading.

Charles Collins was in the import-export business in Kobe. Thomas Anderson, another American, was his partner. People who knew them would have said they were a nice, congenial pair, friendly toward each other and courteous to everyone else. They did not, in fact, get along at all well.

Collins was a thin, austere man of thirty-seven. He was not married, and no one could ever recall seeing him out with a woman. But he enjoyed many of the other good things of life. He liked tailor-made clothes, fine food, and good drink. His knowledge of liquors was famous in Kobe and members of the foreign colony often invited him to mix drinks at their parties.

Unfortunately Collins could not indulge his tastes as much as he wished. Business was poor. He had expected to make money in Japan, but taxes and competition made that impossible. He did not like his business and he did not like the Japanese. He was impatient to get out.

"God, I'd like to move on," he said. "But not before I've taken the Japanese businessmen here for some of their crooked money."

"You can't lump all of them together and call them crooked," protested Anderson.

"You're crazy if you believe anything else. They're always after the foreign businessman—they've been after us ever since we came. There's not one of them who wouldn't sell his own mother, and you know it."

Anderson was totally unlike Collins. Younger, about twenty-eight, he was tall and big-boned. He em-

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braced life with the enthusiasm of a small boy. He did not like to see business poor, but being in a foreign country was exhilarating to him and he would not have missed it for anything. He was friendly toward the Japanese.

Like Collins, Anderson was a bachelor. But there was no doubt of his fondness for women. He had several Japanese girl friends and he sometimes went out with an American or English girl. He did not care one way or the other about clothes, food, or liquor. He would wear anything, eat anything, and drink anything. His living habits were annoying to his business partner.

"I wish you would wear a tie when we have friends in from the Consulate," Collins complained.

"When *you* have friends in from the Consulate. I don't invite them."

"No, and you do damn little to help entertain them. We owe them dinners, you know."

"Nuts! We owe them nothing. I'd sooner invite some Japanese who could use the food."

One evening, when Collins had asked some business people to their house, Anderson turned up with a Japanese girl. She was a pretty creature, but the red sweater and tight skirt she wore made one wonder about her source of income. The next day Collins was furious.

"Did you have to bring that slut here? You might have gone to a hotel!"

"I don't know that she's a slut," Anderson said quietly. "She was hungry and I brought her here to feed her. When she finished, she left. You're wrong if you think anything else happened."

"I don't care a damn if you spent the night with her!" Collins was almost shouting. "But don't bring her here when I'm doing business."

"You should stop working once in a while and relax."

The two men might have got along better if they had not lived under the same roof. But it was impossible for them to pay rent on two houses. They lived in a foreign-style bungalow high on the steep hills overlooking Kobe. It was isolated and inconvenient, but it was quiet and cheap, and there were fine views of the city. The only other house nearby belonged to Mrs. Sato, their landlady.

Mrs. Sato was high on Collins's list of hates. She was a tiny, middle-aged widow who owned several pieces of property in the hills. She was said to have a great deal of money. She lived modestly, however, in a simple Japanese-style dwelling about two hundred feet up the hill from the Collins and Anderson house. Collins hated her because of the rent.

"Do you realize what she charges us? We'd pay as much in the States. And she's too damned tight-fisted to take our check. I didn't have the money with me for

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the rent last week and I offered her a check. She had the nerve to say she preferred cash."

"Oh, well, it's the custom. Most people pay cash."

"Cash or not, it's too much money."

"Not at all. We couldn't get a lower rent anywhere."

"No, and do you know why? Because for the foreigner the rents go up. We'd be squeezed and drained of every penny no matter where we went."

"I don't feel squeezed."

Collins glared at him. "You're a regular Jap-lover, aren't you?"

That night, in the small hours, the earthquake struck.

It did not seem serious at first. Collins awoke in his room to find the house gently swaying. Then the walls creaked and the big glass windows rattled and suddenly the whole house gave little jumps. He leaped from the bed and stood in a doorway. He had heard this was the best thing to do.

Anderson awoke more slowly. At first he could not bring himself to leave his bed. It seemed as safe a place as any. He pulled the covers over his head and hoped the ceiling would stay in one piece.

Collins thought of running outside. But suddenly a section of the steep tile roof slid away and crashed onto the front steps. The tremors increased sharply. Collins felt terror mounting inside him, but he could not move. He jumped as a window cracked, and again as a great flash of light split the blackness beyond the window. A second later a sound he had never heard before set his nerves on edge. Again the light flashed and again the sound pierced the night. Somewhere, he knew, high tension lines were swinging against each other. He turned and saw Anderson standing beside him.

Then the quake stopped.

The two men were unhurt and the house still stood. Although they went back to bed neither could sleep, and when dawn broke Anderson walked down into the city. When he came back Collins was just getting up.

"What's it like outside?"

"Horrible. I had no idea. We were awfully lucky, Charlie. This house must be well built. Hundreds of Japanese were killed. They ran into the little streets and the roofs slid down on top of them. Mrs. Sato is dead."

"What!"

"I went up to see if she was all right. She never made it out of bed. A beam in the ceiling gave way and hit her in the face. She must have died quickly."

"I'm going up there."

Anderson looked at him. "Nobody's come for her yet—and it's not a pretty sight. If the phones are working we ought to call the police."

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"No. Don't do that yet." There was a strange note in Collins's voice. "I want to have a look first."

Anderson watched him go and then surveyed the damage to the house. It wasn't bad, considering. A few windows were broken. But by a miracle most of the dishes and vases were intact. They had fallen on the springy mats that make a Japanese floor. The worst damage was the cracks in the walls.

He went outside and examined the house from a distance. It looked all right except for the slice of roof that had fallen away. Little fissures in the ground had formed here and there, and he saw with a shock that a hillside spring had ceased to flow. Somehow this seemed more awesome than anything else. He walked around the house and carefully inspected all four sides.

Just about then, Anderson realized that Collins had been gone a long time.

Anderson walked up the path toward Mrs. Sato's house. It was a small dwelling, set off by itself, surrounded by a wall. He went through the gate.

No one was to be seen and it was very still. Perhaps Collins was somewhere else. But as Anderson turned to go he heard a scraping noise and the sound of something falling. He entered the house and found Collins in Mrs. Sato's room. The poor woman still lay where she had died, the huge beam across her crushed face. Collins was tearing chunks of plaster out of the wall.

"What the hell are you doing?"

Collins did not seem to hear. Anderson strode up and seized him by the arm.

"What are you doing?"

Collins jerked his arm away and went on working at the wall. He spoke in a whisper. "I've found something I've been looking for. I heard she kept something here and, by God, she did! Look!"

The earthquake had opened a fissure in the plaster. Collins was enlarging it. Between the plaster and the outside wall lay several metal boxes. Collins had taken one out and it lay on the floor. "Look inside!" he said.

It was of thin metal, apparently designed to keep out dampness and insects rather than thieves. There was no lock. Anderson took off the cover. The box was filled with Japanese banknotes in 1000-yen denominations.

"There's more than ten million yen here," Collins said excitedly. "Do you know what that is? It's thirty thousand dollars. This puts us back on our feet." He laughed. "It's just as I heard. The old fool didn't trust banks."

Anderson looked incredulously at the money and then back at Collins. "You're not thinking of taking it?"

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"Don't be an idiot. Of course we're taking it! The woman is dead. She has no relatives or friends. Finders keepers. It's all ours!"

"How do you know she had no relatives? Even so, we can't take it. It belongs to the Japanese Government if no one claims it. If we take it, we're stealing it."

"You're talking nonsense. Do you think the Japanese wouldn't steal from us if they had the chance?"

"That depends on the particular Japanese."

Collins swore. "You think the Japanese are so wonderful, you can damn well have them. If you don't want this money, I'll keep it all myself."

Anderson spoke slowly. "I can't let you do that, Charlie."

The two men looked at each other.

"And I can't let you stop me," Collins said.

"I *can* stop you. I'm stronger than you."

"Not when I have this."

Anderson could hardly believe his eyes. Collins was pointing a U.S. Army .45 at him. "Where did you get that?"

"I found it here when I was looking for the money. And it's loaded. I thought there might be looters nearby. I didn't think I'd have to argue with you."

Anderson tried to smile. "You're not going to shoot anyone."

"I'll shoot anyone who gets in my way."

"Give me that gun." Anderson took a step toward Collins.

"You crazy fool. You've seen too many movies. Keep away from me."

Anderson took another step. "Give me that gun, Charlie." There was kindness in his voice, as if he were talking to a child.

The gun fired.

Surprise crossed the faces of both men. Anderson fell backward into the flimsy paper wall of Mrs. Sato's room. Then Collins fired again and again . . .

It was quiet. The morning air was as still as if the wind were holding its breath. No one had been attracted by the shots. Collins was safe for the moment.

The only thing to do was get away. God knows he had not meant to shoot Anderson. He could not account for the sudden impulse that had come over him. He had known only that nothing must come between him and the money. It meant everything to him. It meant freedom to start again after so many years of nothing, freedom from the tyranny of work.

But how could he hide what had happened? There were already clues around, too many of them. The Japanese police were good, there was no doubt about it. They would find the body; they would find fingerprints.

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Then all at once the answer came to him.

He would burn the house. Nothing is easier than to set fire to a Japanese building; they are made of straw and paper and wood, and they burn fast. No firemen would come, for they were busy in the city below. Besides, he would make sure it burned quickly.

Collins went back to the house Anderson had shared with him and returned with a suitcase and a large can of kerosene. They had used the kerosene in the cold months for heat. He carefully poured it over Anderson and around him. It saturated the clothes and the straw mats. The fire would be quick and efficient. He put the empty kerosene can in Mrs. Sato's storeroom.

Collins took the remaining metal boxes from the wall, removed the money from them, and stuffed the suitcase. The banknotes were in small bundles held together with bands of paper on which some Japanese was written. He supposed it was Mrs. Sato's name. It was something to dispose of later, but not now. There was no time.

He saw too that he must take the gun with him. If it were not there and if the body were thoroughly burned, the police might never dream he had been shot. Anderson would be thought just another earthquake victim.

Collins put the gun in the suitcase. Then he lit a match and dropped it near the body. The flames leaped up immediately. He grabbed the suitcase and ran out of the house.

Outside, there was still no one in sight. Luck was with him. He ran down past their house to the road. But then he stopped. As he neared the city, there would be people about. He must not attract attention by running.

Collins crossed the road and took a path he sometimes used. It led down through the trees, across another road, and finally to a street with a few small shops. The earthquake damage was terrible.

Now that he was out of the trees, Collins could not resist the urge to look back at the hillside. Suppose there was no sign of a fire? But there was. Smoke rose thickly above beyond the trees. And the only sirens to be heard were far away, in the stricken city below.

It was better, he told himself, that Anderson was dead—better even for Anderson. He had been a soft fool. In a few months he would have gone completely native and probably married a Japanese girl. And as a business partner he had been worthless.

Collins walked along the street for five minutes until he saw a taxi. He hailed it.

"Osaka Station," he said.

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The driver looked at him in surprise. That was in another city, twenty miles away. In barely understandable English he said, "Maybe—cost—two thousand yen. Okay?"

"Okay, okay. *Hayaku.*" The one Japanese word Collins liked was *hayaku*, which means hurry up.

True, Osaka Station was a long ride off. But it was already 10:00 a.m., and a taxi was his only chance of catching the express that left Osaka for Tokyo at 12:30.

He arrived at noon. Half an hour to spare. The taxi ride had provided time to think; Collins was more confident now. He found the public telephones in the station and put through a call to Tokyo.

Again he was in luck. The connection was good and the operator did not announce the origin of the call. An American voice answered.

"Hello."

"Hello. This is Charles Collins."

"Charlie! It's good to hear from you. Where are you?"

"In Tokyo," he lied. "I've been here several days but I've been too busy to see you. How about dinner tonight at the American Club?"

"Fine, fine. What time?"

"About nine. Sorry to make it so late, but you know what Japanese businessmen are. They only work at geisha parties."

"Of course. I'll see you at nine then. How's Tom?"

"Tom?"

"Tom, Tom Anderson."

He hadn't been ready for that one. "I—I'm sorry, there's someone talking to me here. Tom's fine."

"Good. Well, I'll see you tonight. Goodbye."

"Goodbye."

That was that. When he got to Tokyo, he could back up his alibi with some details.

He went to buy his ticket.

The train Collins stepped into was the Hato, one of the two crack daily expresses to Tokyo. It was crowded with earthquake victims going to stay with relatives, and he had to take first class. Collins smiled. At any other time he would have hated the expense. He usually traveled second class, sometimes third, to save money. It didn't matter now.

"Will you have luncheon now, sir?" The Japanese train attendant spoke to him as he sat down.

Collins did not feel like eating and he was on the point of saying no. But he reflected that it would perhaps be best to eat. He should avoid doing the smallest thing out of the ordinary.

"Yes," he said.

The Hato pulled out at exactly 12:30. Japanese trains are always on time and he would be in Tokyo at 8:30 that evening. He leaned back in his chair and looked around the first-class car.

It was not full. Six foreigners

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sat in various places. They were all obviously American tourists and among them was the inevitable Texan and his wife. The man was big and tanned, and on the seat beside him lay a broad-brimmed hat.

At the far end of the car sat four Japanese—a well-dressed elderly man, two younger men with worried faces, and an attractive girl. A politician, Collins thought, and the girl was probably his secretary. The two young men could be anything—political cronies, male secretaries, even bodyguards.

His eyes returned to his suitcase. It rested on the seat facing him.

He would leave it at Tokyo Station and keep his dinner date. Then he would retrieve it and stop at a small hotel he knew. On checking out of the hotel it would be easy to bribe the desk clerk to write a receipt stating he had paid much more and stayed much longer than he had. The same clerk had done it before. Collins was an old hand at padding expense accounts.

The money itself could be changed through a Chinese he knew in Tokyo whose sole occupation was the illegal traffic in currency. For a fee this man would change the yen into dollars. It was a lot of money and it would be best to have it done in small amounts. Above all, he must not attract attention.

Collins got up and went to the dining car. It was a good lunch of steak, which the Japanese prepare well, and he had a bottle of beer. He returned to the first-class car with a satisfied, prosperous feeling and settled in his seat just as the train rolled into the station at Kyoto.

With distaste he watched the Japanese milling about on the platform. There was a restless activity about them. They might be the most industrious people in the Far East, but they were difficult and irritating to deal with. Anderson had been a fool to like them so much . . .

The lunch and beer made Collins drowsy. He soon fell asleep.

He awoke feeling vaguely ill at ease. Something was wrong. What? The others were still in the car. Some were reading; some were having a drink.

Then Collins realized that the train was standing still. It was in a station, and he saw with a shock that it was still the Kyoto station. He glanced quickly at his watch. The train had not moved for three hours.

He motioned to the car attendant. "I've been asleep. What's wrong. Why are we still in Kyoto?" He tried to speak in as normal a tone as possible.

"I am sorry, sir. We will go very soon."

"I thought this train was never late. What happened?"

"I am sorry, sir."

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"I asked you what happened." Damn, these people were annoying! He tried to check the anger in his voice. The Texan was looking at him.

"The earthquake, sir. There is a long tunnel ahead and it is not considered safe. They are checking it now."

Collins almost laughed at the irony of it. The act of Nature that had made him rich now threatened all his plans. Even if the train started immediately it could not reach Tokyo before midnight; he could not possibly keep the date at the club.

Ten minutes later the train began to move. It crept through the tunnel, then picked up speed.

Collins tried to go back to sleep, but he could not. He picked up an American magazine, threw it down. His thoughts went again and again to his alibi. He must think . . .

He could invent a plausible excuse for not showing up at the club. At least he had made the phone call. But that was too little to back up the story that he had been in Tokyo several days. The hotel receipt would help. He could find back copies of English-language Tokyo newspapers and put them in his hotel room. Or he could buy something in a shop and wrap it in an old newspaper. None of his acquaintances would know he had just come from Kobe. He needed only a believable story, and evidence to back it up. Chances were he wouldn't need any story at all . . .

The train now rushed at a breakneck speed, trying to make up the lost time. It flew across the rice fields and through the towns, its whistle screaming. Other trains stood on sidings to make way for it. Perhaps, thought Collins, he would make Tokyo by 11:00. If so, he could still go to the club. His friend would have left, but other people would see him . . .

Hours later, at a few minutes past 11:00, the Hato glided into Tokyo Station. Long before it stopped, Collins was standing at the car exit, suitcase in hand. Figures on the platform slid past, slower and slower. Finally the train halted.

He stepped off.

Two uniformed Japanese came forward, blocking the way. They spoke as if nothing were wrong. But the words froze Collins's heart.

"We are sorry. Please to accompany us. Some money must be returned.

How in heaven's name did they know? By an effort of will Collins pulled himself together and thought hard. Beyond them stood three policemen, watching. The two men who had stopped him, he saw, were unarmed and dressed differently from the policemen. Who were they? Special railway

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police? The uniformed policemen stood several yards away. Just as far away in another direction a flight of steps led down from the platform.

Collins set his suitcase down slowly. He straightened up. Suddenly, with all his force, he shoved the two Japanese away, seized the suitcase, and sprinted for the stairs.

They came from everywhere at once. Two policemen ran up the steps, two more hit him from each side. Someone else pinned him from behind, and pain shot through his arms. He could not move. He heard the suitcase fall to the platform.

"Who are you?" asked a Japanese voice. A thin, tall man in civilian clothes stood before him. The eyes searched his face. "Who are you?"

"I am an American—" Collins gasped. The hold on his arms relaxed a little. "I am an American businessman." He decided to bluff. "What right have you to stop me? And who are *you?*"

"I am Suzuki of the Metropolitan Police."

Collins opened his mouth to speak again. But he saw that it was too late. One of the policemen had opened the suitcase.

Suzuki smiled at me.

"Well," I said, "how did you know Collins had the money?"

"We did not know. We did not even know who he was. My men and I were there to meet a certain cabinet minister whose life had been threatened. That was the old gentleman in Mr. Collins's car. We were on the lookout, as you say in America, for any funny business. Had Mr. Collins not assaulted the two men who met him and tried to run away, we would not have paid him the slightest attention."

"But the two men knew of the money. Who were they?"

Suzuki laughed. "Oh, but they did not know. I almost forget them. They were simply employees of the Japanese National Railways. They were waiting to meet all the first-class passengers, not just Mr. Collins."

"But I don't see—"

"The Hato is a special train and it is not supposed to be late. When it is, no matter what the cause, the National Railways always refund passengers their money. A Japanese—or a person truly interested in the Japanese—would not have made so foolish an error. You see?"

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **PATRICK QUENTIN**

TITLE: ***Death and the Rising Star***

TYPE: Detective Story

DETECTIVE: Peter Duluth

LOCALE: New York

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *A glittering tale of a famous theatrical producer and his persecution by a starlet preposterously named Didi Cheri . . . and a full course on Broadway in one easy lesson.*

WHEN I FIRST HEARD OF DIDI Cheri, I had no idea who she was and cared less. Everything was going fine with *Larksong*. Audrey Harris had read the script in London and was crazy to play Stella. She hadn't actually signed, but I was expecting the clinching cable any minute. With Audrey sewed up, I was as sure—as any poor Broadway producer can be—that Peter Duluth, Inc., had a smash hit on its hands.

Didi Cheri! What a preposterous name! That's all I thought. No one, not even a Wampus Baby Star of 1928, deserved to be called Didi Cheri.

Western Union seemed to agree with me, for at the end of the telegram from Beverly Hills they had written the name out a second time: DIDI CHERI QUERY.

The telegram itself did not mince matters.

UNDERSTAND YOU ARE CASTING LARKSONG ONLY ONE ACTRESS IN WORLD CAN DO STELLA THE ONE THE ONLY THE INCOMPARABLE DIDI CHERI PLAZA 9-0999 LOVE AND TO IRIS

DANNY KAYE

Iris, my wife, happened to be in the office. She'd dropped in for a moment on her way to a visit with her mother in Schenectady. I showed her the telegram.

"Didi Cheri," she said. "It sounds like the fourth row at the Folies

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Bergères. But overdone. Is it one of Danny's gags?"

Five minutes after she'd left, Bill Austin, the young stage manager I'd just hired for *Larksong,* buzzed me from the next office. He had Marlene Dietrich on the wire for me. "Peter, angel." The famous satin voice rustled in my ear. "Have you signed Audrey Harris yet?"

"Not yet."

"Then don't. I've found the actress for you. She's marvelous, fantastic. That new little girl—Didi Cheri."

"But, Marlene . . ."

"You know how to reach her? Of course you do. Plaza 9-0999."

"But, Marlene . . ."

"Peter, *Liebchen,* I hang up now. I am in a terrible rush. I'm off to Green Hills to visit Papa! Didi Cheri . . . Remember. Didi Cheri."

As I sat, rather stunned, looking at the phone, Bill Austin buzzed me again.

"Gee, Mr. Duluth, now it's Bankhead."

"Peter, darling!" Miss Bankhead's unique voice sounded in my ear. "I hear you're being dreary enough to get Audrey Harris for *Larksong.* My dear, are you out of your mind? Don't you realize you can get that divine little Didi Cheri? Peter, she's fabulously talented. She . . ."

The buzzer buzzed and Bill Austin's awed voice croaked on the intercom. "She's on the other phone too."

"Who?"

"Miss Bankhead. On two phones at once! I knew that woman could do anything, but . . ."

Light dawned. I said, "Put her on," and for a moment, one Miss Bankhead was gushing at my left ear about Didi Cheri while a second Miss Bankhead was asking my right ear about some vice-president at CBS. I slammed down Miss Bankhead to the left and said to the one on the right:

"Tallulah, have you heard of an actress called Didi Cheri?"

"Didi Cheri? Can anyone be called Didi Cheri? Really, darling, the very thought of it makes me retch."

"So!" I said.

I wasn't amused or intrigued or fascinated or any of the other things I was supposed to be. I was merely exasperated. Okay, so this Didi Cheri proved that she could mimic Miss Dietrich *and* Miss Bankhead *and* she had a friend in California who could sign telegrams "Danny Kaye." But if she thought she could pressure me into calling Plaza 9-0999 with these maddening stunts she was out of her mind.

The Danny Kaye telegram was still on my desk when Bryce Bernard came to take me to lunch. Bryce Bernard and his wife ran some sort of drama school. They had recently merged with a small-time actor's agent called Archie

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Stone and now the outfit boasted the grandiloquent name of the Bernard-Stone Academy Agency. I didn't know much about Bernard, but he'd been pestering me on the phone to try out one of the Academy graduates for the small role of Stella's brother which still had to be cast, and, largely as a favor to Bill Austin—who was a Bernard-Stone client—I'd promised to case the boy.

Bryce Bernard was a big, florid, immensely self-confident man with a braying laugh who thought he had Personality. He'd been in the office only a few seconds when his never-miss-a-trick eyes fell on the telegram. Unabashedly he picked it up and whistled.

"You're not letting this fool you, are you? Danny Kaye sponsoring Didi Cheri! That would be the day!"

"You know her?"

"Know her! She was an Academy student until we threw her out. She's crazy, that one. Worse than crazy. She's dangerous!" His laugh brayed. "Last week she threatened to kill me."

"Kill you?"

"She came yelling into the office like a harpy out for my blood just because we hadn't converted her overnight into the First Lady of the Stage. A real menace. No talent, no nothing, except a colossal ego and a genius for making trouble. Whatever you do, avoid Didi Cheri like the plague."

That was all I wanted to know about Didi Cheri. When we left the office, I told Bill Austin to take all my calls from President Eisenhower personally and screen them.

Luke Little was the name of the actor Bryce Bernard was trying to sell. During lunch at Sardi's, Bernard told me how wonderful he was himself, how wonderful the Bernard-Stone Agency was, and, in passing, how wonderful Luke Little was. He seemed nervous and much too eager to please. I smelled a phony. Halfway through lunch his new partner Archie Stone showed up. I'd known Archie off and on for years before the merger. He was a sallow, mournful little man—a fairly good agent, and he always had a few pretty sound clients like Bill. That day Archie seemed as jittery as his partner, but prodded by Bernard he joined in the sales talk on Luke Little.

After lunch they took me to the Academy Agency, which was housed in a big, dreary building between 8th and 9th Avenues. Luke Little, who had a Southern accent to end all Southern accents (and looked more like a low I.Q. bull calf than an actor), was waiting in Bernard's office. I had a script of *Larksong* with me, and while we gave him a chance to glance through the part, Bernard took me upstairs to show me around the school.

It seemed the usual thing: big, drafty rehearsal rooms crowded

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with stage-struck kids being taught how to hit the big time by broken-down actors and actresses who'd never even hit middle time themselves. There were also smaller rooms for private lessons. Bryce Bernard pushed open the door of one of them and revealed a very handsome young man and a blonde locked in each other's arms.

The blonde saw us and disengaged herself from the young man and smiled a bland, dazzling smile at Bernard.

"Hi, darling, I was trying to loosen Gregory up in his love scenes. To him all women are Whistler's Mother." Her eyes kindled with interest. "You're Peter Duluth, aren't you? I'm Gloria Bernard, Bryce's wife." She indicated the flustered young actor. "This is Gregory Remington. You're not looking for a juvenile, are you? Gregory's got a lot on the ball."

To me, Gloria Bernard's explanation of the episode seemed perfectly on the level, not that I cared one way or the other. But Bryce Bernard's reaction was remarkable. All his grinning complacency was gone. He was literally quivering with jealous fury. The last thing I wanted was to get entangled in a family brawl, so I suggested we go hear Luke Little read.

The reading was disastrous. I've heard thousands of incompetent actors, but Luke Little topped them all. I was so mad at having been railroaded into wasting my time that I killed the reading in a couple of minutes, went into a reasonably polite "Sorry" routine, and got up. To my astonishment the oafish Luke Little turned on Bernard right in front of me.

"You told me you'd get me this part. You said it was in the bag. What sort of an agent . . . ?"

I hurried out of the office. Bryce Bernard hurried after me and pleaded with me to reconsider. When he saw he was only boring me, he shifted his tactics. Luke Little, he confessed, was a Texas oil heir. If I gave him the part, he'd be good for at least twenty grand to back the show. That was the end. If ever I have to hire a bad actor through a punk agency in order to raise money for a production, I bow permanently out of Broadway. I told Bryce Bernard exactly what I thought of him, of Luke Little, and of the ethics of the Bernard-Stone Academy Agency, and I strode off down the corridor.

Archie Stone was coming out of another office. I glared at him. "What's happened to you? You used to be a reputable agent."

He looked at me with a sickly smile. "You didn't like Luke?"

"Like him? I love him. I'm going to marry him." I stormed out of the building. I'd forgotten Didi Cheri, but when I got back to the office, Bill Austin handed me a list of her latest sponsors. In my absence, Bernard Baruch had

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called, and Greta Garbo, and Averell Harriman, and Clare Boothe Luce.

"She's fantastic." Bill's dark, intelligent face was reluctantly impressed. "I could have sworn they were all real."

The phone rang. He picked it up and listened. "No, he's not." He slammed down the receiver.

"Who is she now?" I said.

"Johnny Ray. Gee, Mr. Duluth, call Plaza 9-0999—just for the heck of it."

I withered him with a glance. "If you ever mention Didi Cheri or the Bernard-Stone Academy Agency, you're fired."

"Wasn't that actor any good? Archie was all steamed up about him."

"The very thought of him," I said, quoting Miss Bankhead, "makes me retch."

I got through what was left of the afternoon. That night I was home alone. Around ten thirty a collect call came in from Iris in Schenectady.

"Peter."

"Hi, darling. How's your mother?"

"She's fine. Peter, the most extraordinary thing happened. Mother and I met a little actress at a cocktail party this evening. I know Audrey Harris would be wonderful, but this girl is fantastic. She's Stella down to the tiniest detail. And I got her to read. Peter, you can't believe . . ."

My wife is not only a fine actress, she's also the shrewdest talent spotter I know. Dubiously I said, "Who is she?"

"It's a rather unusual name. I can't think why we haven't heard of it before. It's Didi . . ."

Fury clutched me by the throat. That little monster! She'd read about Iris's Schenectady visit in the columns; she'd even imitated the collect-call operator. I yelled into the mouthpiece:

"Listen, you. If you ever dare to call me here or at the office or at any other telephone number in the entire universe, I'll have you slapped in jail. I'll have you deported. I'll have you . . ."

"But, darling," came the uncannily exact replica of my wife's voice, "what on earth's got into you? I . . ."

"No," I said slowly, "I won't slap you in jail. I won't deport you. I'll kill you."

That, it seemed, was the end of Didi Cheri. For two days I didn't hear a word from her. I didn't hear a word from Audrey Harris, either, but I cast the brother role easily enough without benefit of the Bernard-Stone Agency. On the third evening, about eleven thirty, Bill Austin arrived at the apartment with a cable, looking glum.

"I thought I'd break it to you myself. Mr. Duluth. I stopped by at the office and the cable had come in from England. Audrey Harris

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can't make it. She has a movie commitment."

I was plunged in gloom. You could count on the fingers of one hand the actresses young and talented enough to play Stella. Desperately I put in a call to Claire Bloom in London but they couldn't locate her. Just as I canceled the call the door buzzer sounded. Bill went to answer it. I heard an angry female voice in the hall and then a small, dark girl I had never laid eyes on before swept into the living room. She looked absurdly young, about fifteen; she wore her hair in a ponytail, and she was seething with rage.

"You!" Huge gray eyes blazed at me. "Aren't you ashamed? Of course you're not ashamed. Fame has destroyed all your humanity. You're Nero, that's what you are. *Two hours* I waited in that dark, dreary, empty theater."

"And who do you think . . . ?"

"You dare to pretend you don't know me? When you called me this evening? When you made that date for me to read for you at the Vandolan Theater at nine thirty? I suppose you thought it was funny—to raise my hopes and then dash them to the ground to punish me just because I made all those calls which any girl trying to get ahead would have done . . ."

A copy of the script of *Larksong* lay on the couch. She saw it and leaped to it. Bill Austin hurried toward her.

"Hi, you!"

"Shut up," she said. "Shut up—both of you. You asked for it and you're going to get it, whether you want to or not. Shut up—and listen to Didi Cheri."

She'd picked at random one of Stella's long speeches in the second act. It was incredible. She couldn't have even seen the script before, but instantly as she started to read she was Stella. No talent—that's what Bryce Bernard had said about Didi Cheri. No talent! Bill and I looked at each other bemusedly.

When she finished the speech, Bill crossed to cue her. She went through the whole scene. It was the most extraordinary phenomenon I'd ever witnessed.

"So!" She glared at me. "I was good, wasn't I? I was terrific. Do I get the part?"

My spirits were soaring. "Yes," I said, "you get the part."

All the challenge went out of her face. She looked about eleven years old and terrified. I thought she was going to faint.

"You mean that?"

"I mean it."

"W-what about Audrey Harris?"

"She can't make it. She's tied up."

"Gee!" she breathed. "The most wonderful moment of my life! It's come at last. When do we go into rehearsal?"

"Any day now."

She smiled wanly. "I hated doing it like this, Mr. Duluth. Barging in, yelling. So unladylike. But I

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knew it was my only hope. And you're to blame anyway."

"Blame?"

"For calling me to read and standing me up. That's when it happened."

"When what happened?"

"The murder," she said. "That's why you've got to explain to the police if you want me in your play. There's a dead man lying in my apartment. If you don't do something, I'll be arrested."

My spirits weren't soaring any more. Crazy! Bryce Bernard had said that too. Okay, the incredible Didi Cheri was a fantastic actress, but what good was she to me if she was also out of her mind?

"Listen," I said. "Enough's enough. You pestered me with those phony calls. You accuse me of standing you up. You know I never called you tonight and . . ."

"You never called me?"

"Of course I didn't."

"But you're my alibi! Oh," she said desperately, "oh, I see. It was a deliberate plot to get me out of the apartment so they could murder him there and blame it on me."

"Listen . . ." I began.

"For pity's sake, stop saying listen." Her eyes were blazing again. "Don't you see how important this is? When I broke into your apartment, I was determined to get to play Stella. That's what I want more than anything in the world and I realized you'd never give me the part if you knew about—about the body. But I thought it'd be all right. I thought after I'd shown you what a terrific actress I am and you needed me, you could just explain to the police that I had nothing to do with it, that I was waiting for you at the theater, but now . . ."

Tears were rolling down her cheeks. She was so extraordinary a girl that I hadn't the faintest idea whether they were genuine or not. And I figured that she probably didn't know, either.

"I went home from the theater," she moaned. "I saw Bryce Bernard lying there. I came right here to you. I thought . . ."

"Bryce Bernard!" I exclaimed. "You seriously claim that Bryce Bernard . . ."

"Oh, dear." Still whimpering, she stamped her foot. "Oh, dear, oh, dear, don't you listen to a word I say?"

"And you haven't called the police?"

"Of course I haven't. The moment I saw him, I came straight here."

I glanced at Bill. He started to speak and then shrugged helplessly.

"If you're making this up . . ." I began.

"Making it up! Can't you see I'm telling the truth? Don't you realize my reading would have been a hundred times better if I hadn't been upset and terrified and jittery because there was a body . . . ?"

I glanced at Bill again. Suddenly

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I had made up my mind. Young actresses like Didi Cheri happen only once in a century. Mad or not mad, and even if, incredibly, Bryce Bernard was lying dead in her apartment, I was going to have her for *Larksong*. I grabbed her arm.

"Come on," I said.

She lived on the Lower East Side in a decrepit old house of small stores and obscure offices. Her cold-water flat was on the top floor. In the taxi I'd remembered that Bryce Bernard had said she'd threatened to kill him. I tried to put that thought out of my mind. But I couldn't after we'd arrived. Because Bryce Bernard was there all right.

His big, overfed body was sprawled across the floor of the bleak little living room, his head bashed in by an andiron which lay blood-stained at his side.

We all gazed down at the body. "You see?" said Didi Cheri in an attempt at an I-told-you-so voice. She looked as if she were going to be ill. So did Bill.

He said, "I guess we call the police."

"No," said Didi Cheri passionately.

"Why not?"

"Because they'll arrest me. And if I'm arrested, how can I be in the play?" She swung round to me. "You can't get Audrey Harris. You know there's no one but me. I'm wonderful. I'll be a star overnight. I'll make you a fortune." In a lightning switch she became forlornly, irresistibly, the Damsel in Distress. "Oh, Mr. Duluth, please, *please*, do something. You see, it's not just that he's here. Last week, in front of three witnesses, I threatened to kill him."

At least she'd admitted it. I turned my back on the corpse. Bryce Bernard had not been my favorite male, but it wasn't nice to look at him. Nothing at all was pleasant any more. "Let's hear it," I said.

"He was a crook. The whole Academy Agency's a filthy racket. They get kids from out of town, kids like me crazy to be on the stage. They take all their money, as advance commissions. They're supposed to teach them and get them jobs. Teach them! You should get a load of those lessons. And you should get a load of some of the students. Any decent agency would tell them they'd never be able to act in a million years, but the Academy Agency just takes their money and keeps stalling on getting them jobs, saying they're not ready. I came to New York with three thousand dollars. I gave them two thousand. That was eight months ago and they never even landed me a TV audition. Last week I got disgusted. I went to the office. I told Bryce Bernard what I thought of him and demanded my money back."

"And what did he do?"

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"He just laughed. That made me madder. I'm terrible, you know, when I'm mad. I said if I ever set eyes on him again I'd bash his head in. I swore I'd get that *Larksong* part without any help from him. I swore it. That's why I pestered you so much. I was going to get it—if only to show Bryce Bernard."

She sounded convincing—which, of course, didn't mean a thing. But everything she'd said about the Academy Agency checked with my own impression; and Bryce Bernard's attempt to warn me against her could easily have been motivated by spite, just because she'd had the guts to stand up to him.

I glanced at Bill. I hadn't hired him through the agency; I'd hired him because he'd done a good job for another producer who'd recommended him. But he *was* a Bernard-Stone client.

"Is this true about the agency, Bill?"

He was watching Didi Cheri dubiously. "It could be, I guess. I don't know a thing about the Bernards and the Academy angle. I was Archie Stone's client before the merger, and Archie's always been on the level with me."

"Oh, they *do* have regular, established clients," broke in Didi Cheri. "Of course they do. But that's only a front. The main thing, the thing they make their disgusting fortune on, is those poor kids. And when they get someone good like me they don't even have enough sense to exploit them! Oh, Mr. Duluth, don't you see? It's one of them. They're all crooks. Dog eat dog. One of them wanted to get rid of Mr. Bernard, and by threatening to kill him and swearing I'd land the *Larksong* part, I gave them the perfect chance to frame me. They sent me off on that wild goose chase and then they lured him down here. They didn't realize I'd go running to you. They thought I'd just get back from the theater and find the body and call the police and then, when I'd told them about you calling me to read and you'd denied it . . . oh, dear, oh, dear."

I was painfully torn in two directions. The magic, the enormous excitement, of having found my Stella was still there. But another part of me was sensible enough to realize how shamelessly this exasperating little girl had been pushing me around. What proof was there that she hadn't killed Bryce Bernard and merely invented the fantastic Vandolan story to save her own skin?"

I said, "If you were at the Vandolan Theater, how did Bryce Bernard get into this apartment?"

"Oh, I've already figured that out. When I made that scene at the agency, I got so mad I forgot my purse. I left it there with a key in it. I had another key and I was darned if I'd demean myself by going back to pick up the purse. So

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any of them could have taken the key, let themselves in, and called Mr. Bernard from here."

"At the Vandolan, did you wait in the theater itself or in the little alley that's right outside the stage door?"

"In the theater. When I got there, the stage door was open but no one was around. Later, when I left, the stage door had been locked. I had to get out through one of the exits in the house."

"So no one saw you?"

"No one at all."

That was hopeless from the police point of view, but it sounded plausible enough. I knew the Vandolan stage-door man. When there was nothing much doing, he spent most of the evening drinking beer in an 8th Avenue spot and usually closed up around eleven. I'd told him I wouldn't be using the theater that night anyway, and it was like him not to bother to search the place before locking up.

All my instincts for self-preservation warned me to call the police, but theatrical enthusiasm and greed got the better of them. Now I'd found her, it would be disastrous for *Larksong* to have Didi Cheri languishing in the Tombs, and certainly she'd be held if we brought the police in now. Okay, I'd gamble on her. There was a chance that she was telling the truth and that one of those dubious characters at the Academy Agency had framed her.

I said, "Who was in the office when you threatened Bernard?"

"Archie Stone and Mrs. Bernard and some dopey Southern actor who was in the clutches. Luke Little is his name."

"Luke Little!"

The phone rang. We all started. It went on ringing. I said to Didi Cheri, "Answer it," and then, changing my mind, answered it myself in a gruff, indistinguishable tone. I recognized Archie Stone's voice at once although it was hoarse and rattled. Was this Plaza 9-0999? Was Bryce Bernard there? He had to talk to him. It was very important.

I said, "What makes you think there's anyone named Bernard here?"

"He left a note for me at the office. I only just found it. It says Peter Duluth called at nine thirty and wanted to see him about a *Larksong* casting. He left this number. I know it's late. But he had a date with me for ten. I waited and waited at home and then finally I went down to the office and found the note."

"Hold on a minute," I said.

I cupped the receiver, thinking fast. At least, if Archie Stone was telling the truth, we knew now how they'd got Bernard down here. They'd used me as a bait, the way they'd used me with Didi Cheri.

Back into the phone, I said, "Sorry to have kept you waiting. They say Bryce Bernard was here,

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but he and Mr. Duluth just left. If you want him, he should be at Mr. Duluth's in about half an hour."

I gave my home address. Archie Stone gasped, "Thanks. Thanks a lot."

He hung up. I explained to the others what I had done. This way at least I had a chance to scare the daylights out of Archie Stone.

Didi Cheri begged to go with me, but she'd filled her quota of troublemaking for one night. Bill said he had an apartment in the East Fifties and his number was in the book. I told him to take Didi Cheri there and wait till I called, then we walked out on Bryce Bernard and took two taxis.

I hadn't been home more than five minutes when the door buzzer sounded. Archie Stone, looking like a dapper and agitated mouse, scurried in.

I'd decided on my tactics in the cab. I gave him a drink and then gave him what-for. I said Bryce Bernard had been murdered, that the Academy Agency was crooked, and that he, Archie Stone, had obviously murdered Bernard to get full control of the racket. I'd never seen a more terrified man. He started babbling incoherently. Sure, the Academy Agency was a racket, but he hadn't dreamed of it when Bernard negotiated the merger. He'd only got wise after some little actress called Didi Cheri had made a scene in the office. Ever since then he'd been trying to get Bernard to cancel the merger.

"I'm legitimate, Mr. Duluth. Bernard only fixed the merger to get a respectable front. I don't fit into a setup like that. You saw how it was the other day with that Luke Little. I knew he was hopeless as an actor, but Bryce made me boost him to you just because he'd given Bryce ten grand to get him on the stage and was beginning to be suspicious and demand results. You've got to believe me. All I've been trying to do is to get out from under. Just this evening I picked up the cancellation papers from the lawyers. Here!"

He fumbled a large envelope out of his pocket. "Bryce promised to sign tonight. That's why I've been so crazy to locate him. Look at them; read them. Bryce gave me five grand for the use of my name, but I already paid the money back yesterday. Those papers cancel the merger. The school's been cleaning up; it's made a fortune; but I never got a cent of that dough, merger or no merger. If Bryce is dead, the whole works goes to Gloria."

I looked through the papers. They seemed on the level. They uncompromisingly stated that Archie Stone had paid back the five thousand and thereby invalidated the merger. Almost certainly that let Archie out—that and the obvious fact that he was too craven to kill a chipmunk, let alone bash his partner's head in.

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"But I still don't get it, Mr. Duluth." He had swallowed his drink and was eyeing me desperately. "How do you know Bryce is murdered? Where is he? At that number—Plaza 9-0999? That's where he was. Somebody . . ."

"If you know what's good for you," I said, "don't ask questions, just play this my way. What about Little? You said Bernard chiseled ten thousand out of him and Little got wise to the racket?"

"Sure. After you'd turned him down for *Larksong*, he had a terrific fight with Bryce. But Little can't have killed him."

"Why not?"

"He gave up. He quit. Day before yesterday he flew back to Texas. It can't be Gloria, either. All evening Gloria's been with me at my place—ever since eight o'clock. She was still there when I went down to the office at twelve thirty."

I was starting to feel a most peculiar and unpleasant sensation. Only three people could have framed Didi Cheri in just the way she'd been framed, and all three of them, for one reason or another, seemed to be eliminated. Had I, then, been played for the original sucker after all? Had that brash, talented, impossible little . . .

I glared at Archie Stone. "What was Gloria Bernard doing at your place?"

"I needed her. Bryce didn't want to sign the cancellation. I was working it through Gloria."

"She wanted it signed?"

"No. She didn't either, but I've got Gloria where I want her and she knows it." He gave a sickly grin. "In the jealousy department, Bryce makes Othello look like Bo-peep, and I happened to know Gloria's got a heavy boy friend. She hates Bryce's guts; she'd have left him months ago if it weren't for the dough. She's money-mad."

Excitement started to stir in me. The shrewd, blasé Gloria Bernard, who "loosened up" young actors in the rehearsal rooms, had a boy friend; with Bryce dead she inherited full control of the crooked Academy. That was more than enough motive for her—but what about the boy friend? She could have given him Didi Cheri's key, had him imitate me on the phone, and masterminded the whole murder frame-up by remote control.

I said, "Who's her boy friend? One of the Academy students?"

"Maybe." Archie blinked. "She's far too smart to let on."

"Then how do you know she has one?"

"I caught her a couple of times making phone calls. And then, once when Bryce was in L.A. and she was expecting a late call from a London agency, she gave me a number where they could reach her overnight. Sick aunt, she said! I just laughed and she had to admit it was a boy friend, but she made me swear not to tell Bryce."

"You remember this number?"

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"I couldn't forget it. It's the one hold I've had on her to force her into helping me break the merger. It's Wilton 7-0202."

I scribbled the number down. My excitement was mounting. "Okay," I said. "That's all. Now get out of here."

"But, Mr. Duluth . . ."

"Get out, and if you breathe a word of this to Gloria Bernard, I'll see you're hounded off Broadway once and for all."

A few moments after he'd scurried out, the phone rang. It was Didi Cheri, this time as herself for a change.

"Oh, Mr. Duluth, I can't bear the suspense. What's happening?"

"Where are you?"

"At a drug store down the block. I couldn't stay with Bill. He's sweet, but a girl can't just sit staring hopelessly at a sweet boy when her whole life's at stake. I asked for a glass of milk and ran out when he was in the kitchen."

Suddenly I saw what we had to do. "Come here this instant."

"With the speed of light," said Didi Cheri.

Soon she came running in, her ponytail bobbing, her eyes shining. I told her my hunch about Gloria Bernard and her boy friend.

"With any luck you can work it," I said.

"Me?"

"You can imitate Marlene Dietrich and Tallulah Bankhead and Bernard Baruch; it's a cinch you can imitate Gloria Bernard. Call Wilton 7-0202. Whoever answers, make like Gloria Bernard. Say you and I have just been to see her; say we've discovered Bryce is murdered; say we realize you've been framed, but say you blurted out you'd just remembered you'd left something—your gloves—on the stage at the Vandolan. Explain that the gloves will prove you really were there and give you an alibi. Explain that the only way to keep the frame-up sticking is for him to rush right around to the Vandolan and pick them up before we get there. Also say you babbled something about leaving by a house exit, which means it'll still be open because they don't close from the outside."

"Gee!" said Didi Cheri. "And we'll be waiting there. We'll catch him red-handed. That'll fix them both. Of course it will."

"If she hasn't already got in touch with him," I said. "But there's a good chance she hasn't. If she's as smart as I think, she'll have enough sense to steer very clear of him until her alibi's solid with the police."

Didi Cheri made a spring for the telephone.

"Not here," I said. "We don't know where the boy friend lives. Maybe he's closer to the theater than we are. Come on."

We took a cab to the theater district and squeezed together into a telephone booth in an all-night

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drug store. Didi Cheri dialed the number. A man answered. Taut as a wire, I listened to her extraordinary imitation of Gloria Bernard's sexy New York drawl. For a moment I thought she was overdoing it, but she wasn't. As she delivered the message, I could hear the man's voice, hoarse with nerves, crackling into the earpiece. "No, oh, no! . . . Yes, of course." She slammed down the receiver and wriggled around to face me.

"It worked. It's both of them—Gloria Bernard and the boy friend. This has got them—utterly."

"Quick," I said. "Let's get out of here."

We hurried to the Vandolan. We had almost reached it when we passed a cop on the corner. Didi Cheri spun around.

"A police witness! That's just what we need."

She ran back to the cop and started gabbling. He hadn't, I'm sure, the slightest idea what she was talking about, but Didi Cheri, with her sublime combination of indignation, helplessness, and mystification, was as much a match for him as she had been for me. In a couple of minutes she had him following meekly behind us like a tame bear.

We found the house exit by which Did Cheri had left. It was on the alley leading to the stage door. We slipped through it into the dark theater, leaving it obviously ajar to guide the "boy friend." The policeman had a flashlight. We hurried down the center aisle. The Vandolan has no orchestra pit. I dropped Didi Cheri's white gloves center stage near the edge under the proscenium. Didi Cheri dragged the policeman through the seats into a dark corner behind a column. I lay down on the floor between the first two rows of orchestra seats on the center aisle, the most strategic place from which to jump the "boy friend" when—and if—he picked up the gloves.

I tried to make Didi Cheri join the cop but failed miserably. She lay down behind the seats across the aisle from me, peering tensely at the stage.

"Soon I'll be there," she whispered. "People will be screaming, shouting, bravoing, applauding. Bouquets will be tossed."

"Either that," I said, "or you'll be rotting in jail."

That shut her up. I lay there in the familiar, dusty theater darkness, trying to figure out how I'd managed to let myself be railroaded into doing so improbable a thing. My eyes had become accustomed to the gloom. By peering around the edge of the aisle seat, I could see the gloves gleaming faintly under the proscenium. Hours seemed to pass, but I suppose they were only minutes. Didi was so quiet I thought she must have slipped away. And then, just as the suspense was becoming intolerable, I heard behind me the faint clang-

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ing sound of the exit door being pulled outward. I stiffened. There was a scuffle, a muffled exclamation as if someone had stumbled, and then, very softly, footsteps seemed to start padding down the center aisle.

They were hurrying, almost running. In a couple of seconds they were right up to us, and as I held my breath, I could make out the shadowy shape of legs passing within inches of me. The footsteps went on toward the stage. As I peered around the edge of the seat, a flashlight sprang on. I saw its beam cruise the stage and settle on the gloves. I saw the man scramble onto the stage and bend to pick them up.

Didi Cheri was quicker than I. With a piercing scream of "Help, cops!" she dashed down the aisle, vaulted up onto the stage, and threw herself on the man. As I rushed to join them, he flung her off and sprang to the left. That was when I tackled him. We both went down onto the bare boards of the stage and Didi Cheri, still yelling, jumped on top of both of us.

For a moment all was hopeless confusion; then the cop came lumbering up. The man who had picked up the gloves was writhing under me. The cop's flashlight beam caught both our faces. It blinded me for a moment and it was Didi Cheri who gasped, "Bill Austin!"

I could recognize the man's face then. It was Bill Austin's and it was white and distorted with frustrated fury. For a moment I merely felt stupefied; then it all began to fit. I'd only just hired Bill. I hadn't known a thing about him. If I'd looked him up in the book, I'd have known his telephone number was Wilton 7-0202, but I hadn't. And he was a Bernard-Stone client. I should have guessed that he could have been Gloria Bernard's young man just as well as anyone else, and, with him working for me, the two of them had been in the ideal position to stage the murder. They knew the whole Didi Cheri setup from my end as well as the Academy's. After Bill Austin had killed Bryce Bernard, he'd deliberately stopped by at my place with the Audrey Harris cable to be on hand if anything went wrong. The nerve of it! As I kept him, still struggling, pinioned to the stage, indignation took the place of astonishment.

"Okay." The cop's hand was on my shoulder. "Break it up. Whatever this is, straighten it out at the precinct house."

I scrambled to my feet. Bill Austin got up too.

"Hold him, officer," shouted Didi Cheri. "He's dangerous. He's a murderer. And there's another one, an accomplice, a female . . ."

"Okay, lady, okay."

The cop closed a huge hand around Bill Austin's arm. It was over. My tactics had been chancy

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and Didi Cheri-ish in the extreme, but, like the incomparable Didi Cheri herself, they had succeeded.

We all started down the aisle toward the exit. The cop's flashlight beam, moving at random, rested for a second on Didi Cheri's face. It was ecstatic now, Joan of Arc listening to her voices.

"We've made it!" she breathed. "I get to play Stella after all. Think of it! Didi Cheri in *Larksong*. Huge neon letters blazing across the marquee. Didi Cheri . . ."

The producer in me was beginning to re-emerge. "Where, for pity's sake, did you get that name?"

"What's wrong with it? It's the one thing the Academy Agency gave me. Didi Cheri in *Lark* . . ."

"What's your real name?"

"Dorothy," she said. "Dorothy Gubbins."

"Okay," I said. "In the neon light department, read Dorothy Gubbins."

"But, Mr. Duluth, how can anybody be glamorous when they're called—?"

"With what you've got," I said, "you could be called Pickleburger and be as glamorous as Dietrich, Bankhead, and Garbo all put together."

"Gee, Mr. Duluth, you really mean that?"

"I mean it."

"Gee!" said Dorothy Gubbins, the rising young actress.

And we followed the cop and one of Bryce Bernard's murderers out of the darkened theater.

"Q"

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INDEX TO VOLME THIRTY—JULY-DECEMBER 1957

ALGREN, NELSON: He Swung and He Missed ..... Oct. 29
ALLINGHAM, MARGERY: The Doctor and the Silver Plate .... Sept. 97
ARMSTRONG, CHARLOTTE: A Gun Is a Nervous Thing ..... Sept. 47
BARDEN, JOHN: The Liquidation of Pickle Fat ..... Dec. 71
BARKER, SHIRLEY: The Darkened Stair ..... Dec. 54
BENTLEY, PHYLLIS: Miss Phipps Goes to School ..... Nov. 87
BERKENHOFF, F.: The Mind Reader Oct. 83
BLOCH, ROBERT: Crime in Rhyme Oct. 20
Sock Finish ..... Nov. 15
BOUCHER, ANTHONY: Best Mysteries Nov. 67
Best Mysteries ..... Dec. 75
BREAN, HERBERT: Nine Hours Late on the Opening Run .. Dec. 35
CANNING, VICTOR: Two Deaths of Dr. Kang ..... Aug. 42
CHESSON, R.: You Can't Run Away July 55
CHRISTIE, AGATHA: The Servant Problem ..... July 101
The Cat and the Chestnut .... Oct. 43
Once a Thief ..... Nov. 53
Village Tragedy ..... Dec. 15
COLLIER, JOHN: The Dog That Came to the Funeral ..... Aug. 72
CRISPIN, EDMUND: Gladstone's Candlestick ..... Aug. 101
CURTIS, C.: Mathematical Murder Sept. 86
Third Degree ..... Nov. 111
CUTLIP, J.: The Man at the Latch July 89
DAVIDSON, AVRAM: The French Key ..... Aug. 50
DAVIS, DOROTHY SALISBURY: A Matter of Public Notice .... July 12
DEFORD, MIRIAM ALLEN: Walking Alone ..... Oct. 102
EDMONDSON, G. C.: Stop Being a Sucker ..... Nov. 68
ELLIN, STANLEY: The Faith of Aaron Menefee ..... Sept. 3
FINNEGAN, ROSE: Paid in Full .. Aug. 60
FORRESTIER, MICHAEL: The Portuguese Instructor ..... Aug. 95
GILBERT, MICHAEL: Snap Shot .. Sept. 16
GILFORD, C. B.: Bull in a China Shop ..... Sept. 121
GORDON, A.: Power of the Moon Nov. 33
GREEN, C.: The Serafina Caper.. July 111
HALLIDAY, BRETT: Not—Tonight —Danger ..... Sept. 27
HAMMETT, DASHIELL: Wages of Crime ..... Nov. 82
HARRINGTON, EVANS: Out of the Midst of the Fire ..... Oct. 51
HARRIS, A.: The Last Week .... Oct. 77
HOLDER, WILLIAM: What's the Percentage? ..... Aug. 107
KERSH, GERALD: Macagony's Fist July 85
KING, RUFUS: To Remember You By ..... Aug. 33
Malice in Wonderland ..... Oct. 114
Agree—or Die ..... Dec. 5
KNOWLTON, P.: Man in a Closet.. Dec. 50
KYD, THOMAS: Cottage for August Aug. 24
LACY, ED: The Real Sugar .... Nov. 63
LOCKRIDGE, FRANCES and RICHARD: Pattern for Murder ... Oct. 89
MCCLOY, HELEN: Shock Tactics July 37
NASH, OGDEN: Kill or Be Killed Dec. 69
O'FARRELL, WILLIAM: The High, Warm Place ..... Oct. 36
PENTECOST, HUGH: An End to Fear ..... Aug. 3
QUEEN, ELLERY: Miracles Do Happen ..... July 3
The Wrightsville Heirs ..... Nov. 39
QUENTIN, PATRICK: Death and the Rising Star ..... Dec. 113
ROSSMAN, MARVIN: The Man Who Cut Off His Nose ..... Dec. 97
SALMOND, A.: Never the Twain.. Aug. 81
SARGENT, J. BURNE: Command Performance ..... July 46
SCHECHTMAN, GILBERT: Where There's a Will ..... Nov. 49
SHERWOOD, M.: A True Blue Friend Sept. 104
SLESAR, H.: Personal Interview.. Dec. 30
STADLEY, PAT: The Doe and the Gantlet ..... July 125
STOLPER, B. J. R.: Lilith, Stay Away From the Door ..... Oct. 3
STRONG, L. A. G.: The Birdwatcher ..... Dec. 76
SWART, C. M.: Man of the Week Sept. 89
ULLMAN, JAMES M.: Road Hog .. Nov. 105
VAN SCOYK, B.: Home From Camp Sept. 43
WALLACE, F. L.: Driving Lesson Aug. 119
WALSH, THOMAS: Cop on the Prowl ..... Nov. 3
WEBSTER, D.: The Fatal Secret.. Oct. 75
WELLMAN, MANLY WADE: The Mayor Calls His Family ... July 27
WHITEHILL, JOSEPH: The Town Is Waiting ..... Sept. 107
WILLIAMS, N.: A Way With Woman Oct. 62
WINN, WALTER J.: An Old Japanese Custom ..... Dec. 102
WOLSON, M.: The Glass Room.. Sept. 36

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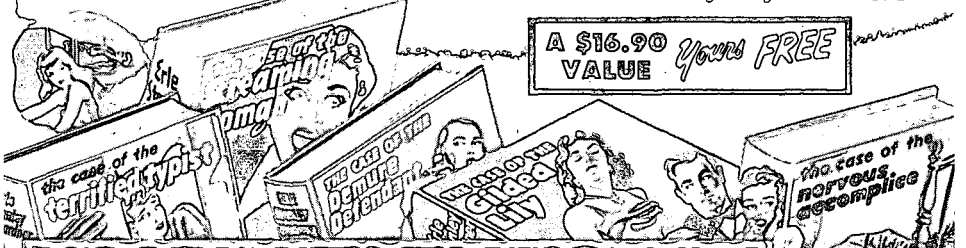
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